

CHINESE COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA:  
ARTS, ARTISTS, AND SOCIALIST HISTORY

A Thesis

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by

Steven Wesley Wyatt

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## ABSTRACT

Since May 23rd, 1942 when Mao Zedong outlined his directives regarding arts policy in his closing remarks as the “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art,” there has existed a singular interconnection between Chinese art and politics. Throughout various political and ideological campaigns, artists and writers were treated as a “cultural army” to mobilize the people and to engineer the soul. To this end, artists and writers were often constrained to specific topics and styles and subject to both censorship and self-censorship. An examination of the results of these constraints and the reaction on the part of artists as well as viewers of this work provides a window into an important aspect of socialist life: the often tense relationship between the ideological demands of the Party and the private desires of the Chinese people.

The intent of this thesis is to describe both the nature of propaganda work and the system of controls under which it was created. Specifically I will describe the constantly shifting political winds, the tightening and relaxation of content and stylistic limitations, and the variegated, often ambiguous, sometimes violent ideological movements, all of which had a profound effect on artistic and literary production. This description includes all major political movements starting with the “Yan’an Talks” in 1942, the ways in which control systems continued to affect art and literary production after Mao’s death in 1976, and how this system continues to have influence today. This thesis also attempts to make preliminary conclusions about the effectiveness of propaganda materials and their potential unintended effects. The purpose of these observations are to highlight the areas in which the study of Chinese propaganda materials is deficient and thus create a space for my future dissertation work.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Steven Wesley Wyatt (born Celso Steven Irizarry-Wyatt) was born in Springfield, Illinois on September 18th, 1983. He earned his B.A. with Honors from the University of Chicago in 2004. In August 2006 he entered the Cornell University Field of East Asian Literature M.A./Ph.D program. His research interests are in the areas of socialist culture, art/literary politics, and their influence on contemporary media in China.

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In *Heroes and Villains in Communist China*, Joe C. Huang discusses the problem of distinguishing propaganda from fine art, "...art moves people while propaganda does not. A Chinese novel moves the reader not because of its propaganda message but because of its artistic presentation of reality through the novelist's private vision. While he has to comply with political reality, he also wants to create."<sup>1</sup> The skillful artist, therefore, so carefully interweaves the propaganda message into his representation of social conditions and interpersonal relationships such that the natural, human response to his work is in agreement with its intrinsic political goals. It is such a delicate, improbable proposition: to harness all artistic creation and apply it toward attaining precise political and ideological goals. Media have always been a viable tool for politicians and ideologues; but less attention has been paid to the fact that the arts are generally a blunt instrument. Their creators are notoriously unreliable and prone to heterodoxy, and its audience is both fickle and unpredictable. In socialist China the historical, traditional Confucian role of the intellectual coupled with the profound penetration of politics into everyday life from 1949 and continuing to a lesser degree even today created an atmosphere that Maoist theory gambled was conducive to successful propagation. Through the scope of history, one can see that the projects of Chinese communism were nothing less than a failure. The major social movements that propaganda promoted-- the Great Leap Forward, The Cultural Revolution, and intervening campaigns cracking down on "rightism"-- are phenomena inherently associated with disaster. At the time of propaganda's production, however, artists were for the most part cooperative when it came producing works along party lines, and audiences were generally responsive when it came to their message, whether out of revolutionary faith and dedication or out of simple self-preservation.

<sup>1</sup> Huang, Joe C. *Heroes and Villains in Communist China; the Contemporary Chinese Novel as a Reflection of Life* (Pica Press, New York, 1973) pg. xi

The relationship between arts and politics is exemplified in the art and literature of any culture; however, the media of China's socialist past and even the Chinese media today exhibit a singular interconnection with politics, despite the liberalizing influences of increasing global awareness and economic reforms. Social trends, economic prosperity or destitution, and politics are just some of the factors that influence artists and writers to create. The politicalization of media and the profound extent to which politics shaped social trends, affecting the daily lives of all Chinese people, ensured the relative uniformity of these factors in China and their effect on writers and artists. In his 1942 *Talks at the Conference on Literature and Art*, Mao Zedong established that political considerations must take precedence over artistic when it came to the production of media, and the Party had total control over the production and distribution of media, including art, songs, literature, poems, and films. This thesis concentrates on the role of two major forms of propaganda: art (largely poster art) and literature.

Art and literature were the two most prevalent arms of media controlled by Party bureaucracy and co-opted in the service of the state. They categorically-- but not always uniformly-- reflected the policies and trends of the party during the socialist period. Artists needed to be reminded of their role in the socialist literary system, and these reminders came in the forms of crackdowns and criticisms that left many artists to wear the dreaded "rightist" hats. This is not to say that propaganda art and literature were devoid of diversity, innovation, or even contradiction. However, the changing images of propaganda art and the modulating scope of socialist literature closely reflect the changing focus in party ideology and occasionally, while the political weather was warm, reflect reactions to this change in focus. If the intent, and more importantly, the effects of these materials were limited to methodic manipulation

of public opinion, their role would not be as worthy of academic exploration. Art and literature can be records of history, transmissions of hopes and idealism, and reminders of past folly. When viewed today, Chinese propaganda media have the singular quality of conveying all of these functions at once. Furthermore, the functions of art and literature continue to evolve, even long after their forms are rendered immutable. This quality is precisely what makes these materials fascinating to study.

This paper is primarily a survey describing the roles and functions of propaganda art during the major social movements in China from 1949-present, the nature of its often parallel relationship to the literature of these periods, the homogenization of artists by political controls, the ways in which artists broke from the trend, and the ways in which control was reinforced. I concentrate more on the propaganda poster than on literature. Though both are very important, the propaganda posters were cheaply and easily produced and did not require their audience to be literate to convey their message. As a result, the propaganda poster was far more ubiquitous, and therefore more influential and possibly more effective. The possibility that literature, with its potential to convey deeper messages, and its primarily urban, intellectual audience might have more potential to be effective because its target audience was more of a threat to Party orthodoxy is a worthy consideration; however, it is not necessarily a sound conclusion. It is possible, for example, that the targets of literature as an educated group were more likely to be the targets of anti-intellectual campaigns as well. As a result, they would be more cynical and less receptive to propaganda messages. More research into the effects of propaganda images and literature needs to be done in order to properly explore this question.

In examining the relationship between the art and literature in each social movement, I will show that their similarities underscore the depth of control Chinese politics exerted on all forms of media; the points at which they diverge are an indication of their differing target audiences and breadth of scope. By examining propaganda produced during this period, I do not seek to give a complete picture of Chinese society itself; it is far too complex to be expressed in any single medium. Rather, one can gain a better understanding of the Chinese socialist art and literary systems; and since this system was undeniably and deeply influential, by studying it we can gain a more multi-dimensional understanding of Chinese society than through the study of history, or literature, or art alone.

## Propagandizing in China

“So why, I thought, did China have to be so unified, so straight—so boring? The Chinese Communists had done even better than Stalin at homogenizing everyone’s views. Why, I wondered, was this? How could it come about? [...] I’m afraid it has something to do with the nature of the Chinese people. They generally submit to authority, seek an appearance of public unity, and are embarrassed by breaks in decorum.”<sup>2</sup>

-Liu Binyan

Though the focus of this paper is the propaganda media of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), this form of media did not suddenly spring forth in 1949 at the founding of the People's Republic. Art in service of politics was codified as a policy at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art in 1942, but the concept that a social consciousness could be engineered through control of arts and literature is deeply rooted in China's Confucian tradition. The charge of historical Confucian ideology is the maintenance of harmony through moral instruction and correct policies.<sup>3</sup> The Confucian ideal of a benevolent scholar-ruler’s importance lies beyond his dominant position in social hierarchy; he is a protector of social harmony. And to that end, he is a moral model for others to emulate. One of the central moral virtues in Confucianism is the observance of the five cardinal relationships: father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and between friends. The relationship most relevant to this discussion, ruler and subject (ruler and minister) is based on another important Confucian concept: loyalty (*zhong*). The Confucian ruler could expect his subjects to obey without question because he had the Mandate of Heaven, which conferred upon him the power to rule until Heaven judged him based on his morality to be unfit. The fact that a ruler ruled was proof of his moral rectitude. The

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<sup>2</sup> Liu, Binyan. Interview. “An Interview with Liu Binyan” by Perry Link, September 2004

<sup>3</sup> Lieberthal, Kenneth *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2004) p. 16

imperial civil service examinations that determined appointment to Chinese officialdom since the Tang dynasty was one method by which models of Confucian ideals were transmitted to each generation of scholars. The examinations tested scholars' ability to understand and reproduce classical Confucian texts with the assumption that mastery of the texts would cause the student to emulate the morality and proper behavior that the texts described.<sup>4</sup> Another main method by which governors propagated Confucian ideals was through representations of model moral characters for emulation. As a result, politics, morality, and artistic expression are all deeply tied to Chinese intellectual consciousness. Chinese political culture has used the arts to propagate ideals of correct behavior and thought throughout Chinese history. By the time the CCP began using media for their own ideological uses, fourteen centuries of Confucian propaganda appealing to social harmony and public morality had already proven that social engineering was in theory an achievable reality in Chinese political life.

The role of Communist propaganda media was in large part derived from, or a re-conception of, the well-established Confucian artistic tradition of creating models for emulation. The post-1942 conception of the tradition constitutes social engineering beyond propagating vague values such as "proper moral behavior" (though some propaganda did have this goal). The objective was to achieve specific social goals by shaping every person's innermost character according to deliberate CCP plans. Given the anti-Confucian impulse of Chinese radicalism of this period, the fact that social engineering has a deep connection to Confucian tradition represents an interesting historical paradox.

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<sup>4</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 1992) p. 11



**Figure 1: Shao Wenjin, Beat the Drum of the Great Leap Forward Ever Harder, Date Unknown**

Propaganda has served a variety of functions. Early on, the emphasis of propaganda was sometimes on reeducation of the masses, such as in the case of posters proclaiming the legitimacy of the Communist government, or as in literature describing the valiant and heroic deeds on the part of Communist resistance soldiers in the “Chinese People's War of Resistance to Japan,” which served the same legitimizing function. Propaganda was also used to promote economic reform. Ideological campaigns in support of economic reforms were a symptom of and remedy for the problem of achieving economic development despite an agriculture-based economy, scarce capital, and a lack of heavy industry. The Marxist theory of change--materialism-- holds that the underlying development of the economic structure of society determines the boundaries of human activity. Lenin later modified this theory



to place more emphasis on the potential effectiveness of revolution to accelerate history. Mao took this idea further, arguing that Chinese people could, with the proper revolutionary outlook, overcome any material odds to accomplish his goals.<sup>5</sup> The existence of movements like the Great Leap Forward are proof of this conviction; and propaganda campaigns in support of these movements were among Mao's primary weapons in making his conviction reality. It is not hard to imagine that these political needs have profoundly affected the development of Chinese artistic and literary creation during the socialist period, begging the question that introduced this paper: should propaganda media be considered art? More to the point, can one consider it to be “good art?”

The question of whether or not art and literature had an audience that appreciated propaganda materials for aesthetic reasons is beyond question.<sup>6</sup> Many people enjoyed unambiguously propagandistic art and literature, perhaps despite their ideological functions, perhaps not. Rather, I regard a more utilitarian interpretation of the term “good” as more pertinent: did propaganda media serve its purpose. This seemingly simple question is fraught with problems about whose purpose, at what time, and from whose perspective. One person did have a well-defined opinion of what constitutes good in socialist art; and his opinion was paramount among all others. Mao Zedong said in his momentous closing speech at the Yan'an Conference on

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<sup>5</sup> Lieberthal *Governing China* p. 63

<sup>6</sup> I will explore this issue later in the paper where subjectivity and the effectiveness of propaganda media will be presented.

Literature and Art in 1942, “Nothing can be considered good unless a large number of people benefit greatly from it.”<sup>7</sup>

This strictly utilitarian view of “goodness” and the unity of politics and art did, for better or for worse, effectively erase everything but the homogenized, official view, in that media played a major role in disseminating major social movements like the Great Leap Forward, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and the Four Modernizations. To that extent, propaganda media were effective. But to what degree did propagandizing (read: politicizing) interfere with the creative, “pure” artistic elements of media creation? One could argue that all art and literature is created in some social and political context, and that this context affected artistic output. Perhaps “pure” art cannot exist unless its creator could exist outside his own social and cultural consciousness, which would appear to be impossible. However, Chinese socialist art was not just subject to the nebulous effects of society, culture, and politics via their influence on artist’s subjective interiority. They most often painted or wrote with the purpose of fulfilling a leader’s expressed command. Perry Link writes in *The Uses of Literature*, “We can rightly say that a political leader’s command is extraneous to literature, but it does not follow that the writer’s response is also extraneous. Writers comply, resist or, more often, do a mixture of the two, and such responses might be carefully thought out, unconsciously reflexive, or somewhere in between.”<sup>8</sup> Despite the heavy-handed influence of political leaders, an artists’ work still reflects his or her desire to create, and in the Chinese case more often than not a genuine

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<sup>7</sup> McDougall, Bonnie S. *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1980) p.74

<sup>8</sup> Link, Perry *The Uses of Literature* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000) p.4

desire to contribute to society out of deference to traditional notions of scholarly responsibility.



**Figure 2: Gu Yuan, *Restoration of the Anshan Steel Mill*, 1948**

One example of an artist who willingly contributed to the communists' efforts was Gu Yuan, whose woodcut *Restoration of the Anshan Steel Mill* appears in Figure 2 above, was a well-known and accomplished woodcut artist and *nianhua* painter who joined the communists in 1938 at Shaanxi. He became one of the founders of the Yan'an style, and a professor in the Central Academy of Fine Arts as well as standing director of the Chinese Artists' Association.<sup>9</sup> Another example of an artist who joined the communist movement early is Yan Han, who produced artwork alongside the Eight

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<sup>9</sup> "Gu Yuan" Sweet Briar College Art Gallery Website, [http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00\\_01/chinesewoodblock/guyuan.html](http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00_01/chinesewoodblock/guyuan.html)

Route Army fighting the Japanese in the War of Resistance. In order to propagandize effectively, he was able to adapt folk images to Communist doctrines (Figure 3).<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 3: Yan Han, *New Year Door Guardian: A People's Fighter*, 1939-1940**

Many writers had out of genuine concern for the welfare of China also embraced the idea that there was a correct “path” that China should follow to progress and that writers should sacrifice their personal visions to help China down this path.<sup>11</sup> Readers of this period were generally supportive of the new government, as indicated by their genuine enjoyment of early revolutionary works. Readers enjoyed socialist narratives of revolutionary struggle like Yang Mo's *The Song of Youth* and Zhou Erfu's *Morning in Shanghai* because the memory of the problems of 1930s and 1940s China were still on readers' minds, and the idealism portrayed in these works was a welcome

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<sup>10</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1994) p. 97

<sup>11</sup> Link, Perry ed. *Stubborn Weeds* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1983) p. 2-6

change. These works would by the later years of socialist media come to reflect an age of nostalgia and optimism.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the age of continuing revolution, the CCP gradually exerted stricter controls over the scope of permissible topics and techniques, and so artists who lived through this period later regarded early socialism as a “golden age.”

It is hard not to believe in light of the long tradition of artists influencing morality in China that the government went to such lengths to create a system in which artistic expression was so closely regulated. The cycle of repression and abuse that writers and artists endured is a testament to the fear that sanctioned ideologues had of the potential influence of these intellectuals. Their power was in large part due to the Confucian tradition described above, but tradition was often also a great weakness. Even after the Communist Party repressed them repeatedly, intellectuals continued to try to express themselves out of habit and duty.<sup>13</sup> Writers and artists could be motivated by self-interest and career calculations. But it would be a mistake to automatically assume that works created outside socialist literary and art controls automatically equal dissent. It is important to note, as I have shown above, that one major concern for writers and artists was the traditional concept of intellectual responsibility, a tradition that Mao Zedong invoked and exploited since May 1942, when he made his speeches at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art.

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<sup>12</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature* p. 67

<sup>13</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing* p. 141

## Control and the Monopoly on Information

“Ideological warfare and literary and artistic warfare, especially if these wars are revolutionary, are necessarily subservient to political warfare, because class and mass needs can only be expressed in a concentrated form through politics.”<sup>14</sup>

-Mao Zedong, *Yan'an Talks*, 1942

Communist control of art and literature was first articulated at the three week long “Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” that was held May 2 – May 23, 1942. Mao Zedong’s opening and closing speeches had lasting influence in shaping the attitude writers and artists had toward their role in the communist system. They also exemplified the depth of control Mao had over the media even before the Chinese Communist Party was the official government regime. The purpose of the speeches, from the point of view of a government aspiring to unify China under one rule was to ensure shared values and morals following the perceived breakdown during the Nationalist Period (1912-1949). In general, the speeches were an elaboration on Stalin’s concept of art and literature as a political weapon in class struggle and revolution.<sup>15</sup> Soviet theory and practice were the inspiration for much of Mao’s cultural policy.

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<sup>14</sup> McDougall *Talks at the Yan'an Conference* p. 75

<sup>15</sup> For details about early socialist realism in the Soviet context, see Struve, Gleb *Soviet Russian Literature*, (George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., London, 1935) particularly pages 238-251



**Figure 4: Artist Unknown, *The central people's government constitutes the only legitimate government of all the people of the People's Republic of China*, 1949**

Up until the breakdown of relations with the Soviet Union in 1959-1960, Chinese artists would go to the Soviet Union to study the techniques used there. Mao's approach to using the experience of foreign countries as a guide to formulating cultural policies is a typically pragmatic one: "In the international sphere, the experience of foreign countries, especially the Soviet Union, can be used to guide our work in reaching a wider audience and raising standards, *provided that their experience is good.*"<sup>16</sup> Mao advocated the use of socialist realism (in the speeches, proletarian realism), which was a Soviet creation. Socialist realism was an "inspired mirror" that reflected the ideals of Socialism as well as a vision of its utopian future. In reality, it was a mirror that reflected a struggle on the part of sanctioned ideologues to inculcate correct attitudes. This introduces a considerable challenge when one

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 72

analyzes these works. How does one account for the distortions this type of art creates? What aspects of real socialist life can one glean from these materials? Maybe one can not hope to see the reality of socialist life in socialist realist art and literature, but the vision of idealized life is important in understanding what hopes and ideals drove the Chinese people forward through some of the greatest human tragedies in history.

Mao's strategy for reaching the masses with art and literature was to emphasize the importance of the proletariat to the mostly intellectual, bourgeois writers and artists.<sup>17</sup> He called for the artists to form a "cultural army" to go among the people and gain an understanding of their values. Mao, using a common strategy that he will repeat throughout history, cites "mass needs" to rationalize his policies regardless of whether or not his prescriptive policies actually coincide with actual popular needs. However, bending Chinese intellectuals to the will of the state was not an unprecedented proposition, as indicated in the above discussion of Confucianism. What is especially significant about the 1942 *Yan'an Talks* is the rejection of art for art's sake and belles lettres as self-indulgent and bourgeois. He said, "In the world today, all culture of literature and art belongs to a definite class and party, and has a definite political line. Art for art's sake, art that stands above class and party, and fellow-traveling or politically independent art do not exist in reality."<sup>18</sup> Beyond the effect of severely limiting the scope of permissible literary and artistic topics, the statement had the effect of legitimizing or rejecting certain styles based on their "proletarian" or "bourgeois" backgrounds, respectively. For example, the traditional Chinese end of year painting style, *nianhua*, was deemed appropriate for adaptation to

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 61 Here Mao is certainly implying that the present writers and artists are bourgeois.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 75



socialist needs since it decorated even the poorest peasant homes, while the traditional landscape style, *guohua*, was judged to be the art of the bourgeois class because this style often appeared on the walls of the wealthy.

Yan'an policy, while remaining official policy, was still contested in literary scene during the 1950s. In fact, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was movement toward the liberalization of literature, even toward depoliticization of literature, as well as the reform of *guohua*. Unfortunately, this trend was cited as “betrayal of principles” and was one of the impetuses for the Cultural Revolution.<sup>19</sup> This pattern of liberalization followed by crackdown repeats itself relentlessly throughout the campaigns and history of socialist Chinese art and literature.

Mao was correct to cite the disunity of artists in China. Many artists were still in Nationalist-controlled areas (particularly in large cities) while the Communists were engaged in the Long March, and therefore they were not necessarily familiar with Communist policies. One of the problems that Mao wanted to pre-empt was sectarianism. He said, "...the only way to get rid of sectarianism is by raising the slogan, 'Serve the workers and peasants, serve the Eighth Route and New Fourth Armies, and go among the masses,' and actually carry it out in practice; otherwise, the problem of sectarianism will never be solved. Lu Xun has said that disunity on the front of revolutionary literature and art is caused by lack of a common purpose, and that this common purpose is to serve the workers and peasants."<sup>20</sup> Vice Premier Zhou Enlai reiterated the need for unity, among other concerns, in his opening speech at the All-China Congress of Literary and Arts Workers in 1949. He made five points: unification of all artists is necessary, artists were to serve the people, popularization is

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 39

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 67

more important than raising standards, old literature and art were to be remolded, and art leaders must avoid factionalism and serve the entire country.<sup>21</sup>

The effect of the *Yan'an Talks* was that literature and art from the very beginning of Socialism had no course but to be shaped by political controls. Media were subject to censorship-- both the censorship of a substantive system of literary and artistic control, the purpose of which was unequivocally for social engineering and self-censorship. Artists would never consider producing explicit dissent because the state (via the Department of Propaganda) controlled the modes of literary production. There was no private publication. The state would never publish it, and dissent could only lead to punishment.<sup>22</sup> Apolitical, non-utilitarian art became akin to dissent as well. One artist describes his art education as a small boy: "Only once did I just happen to paint a garden with artificial mountains, pavilions, and winter flowers. I was immediately told off by my brother. 'That is a garden of the land-owning class!' he said. Then I was only painting what I had done on holiday (watch goldfish). The teacher's comment: 'Of absolutely no educational value.'"<sup>23</sup> The *Yan'an Talks* became a battle cry for leftist conservatives throughout socialist history when ideologues perceived that the literary/artistic atmosphere was growing too liberal; it often heralded another turn in the cycle of reform and relaxation followed by crackdown and rapid return to conservatism.

When one looks at the cliché and generally mediocre works of art and literature under Chinese Communism, one may be surprised to find how influential they really were. It is interesting to see how successfully these images and stories

<sup>21</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics* p. 36

<sup>22</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature* p. 59

<sup>23</sup> Wolf, Michael *Chinese Propaganda Posters* (Taschen, Hohenzollernring 53, D-50672 Köln, 2003) p. 10

penetrated people's consciousness. Poet and fiction writer Duo Duo writes in *Chinese Propaganda Posters*, "Suddenly I discover myself among them; I see my family, my neighbors, millions of people. A whole era comes flooding back. I keep looking at the posters. The person I am today observes the first half of my life. What emotions am I feeling? Apathy? Shame? Disgust? Abhorrence? Or nostalgia? None of the above? Or maybe a mixture of all of them?"<sup>24</sup> The images in posters were relevant, even essential for creating models for moral, social, and political life. Author Anchee Min writes in *Chinese Propaganda Posters* about her desire to emulate the ideal image of a revolutionary youth, even going so far as to dress like her idol in the poster.<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 5: Posters in a farmhouse in Anhui Province. Opera posters, a Cantonese pop artist portrait, and *The People's Heroes*, a 1984 propaganda poster, 2000**

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 10

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 5

This is not difficult to believe given the depth of penetration that socialist media, particularly propaganda posters had in everyday Chinese life. They owed their ubiquity not only to the supporting role they played in political campaigns, but also because politically themed posters found their way onto the walls in kitchens, bedrooms, and dormitories-- penetrating the lowest levels of social organization. It is apparent that deliberate and strategic implementation of artistic talent coupled with strict party control over distribution and access to media could lead to new social consciousness at least to this degree.

## The Ways in Which Control was Enforced

“By now the strongest censorship, by far, is our own *self-censorship*. Every time I write, I seem to feel a shadow peering over my shoulder—‘shouldn’t say this’...’musn’t phrase that point quite that way.’ But even when I force myself to be conscious of these insidious pressures, I go along with them anyway, because I want to be published. It would be worse if I couldn’t be published at all.”<sup>26</sup>

-Anonymous Chinese Historian

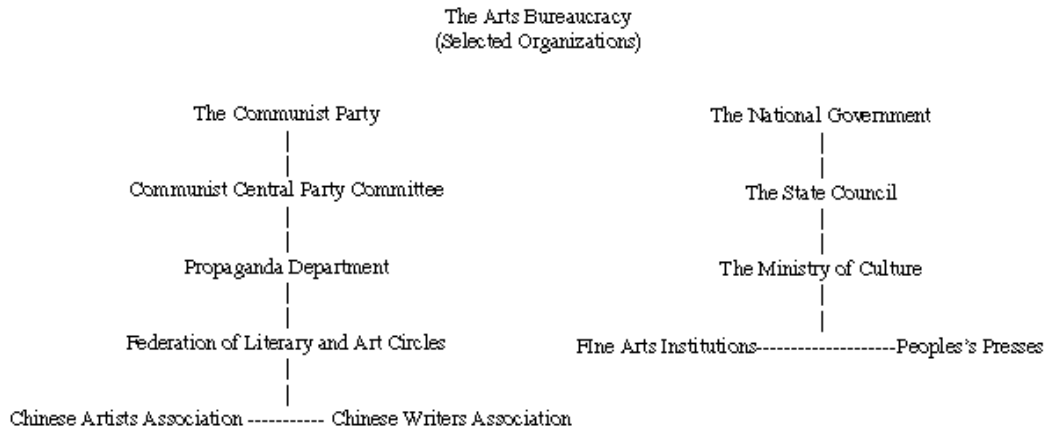
The Party controlled (and to a lesser extent continues to control) art and literature on many levels and through many different mechanisms, including an extensive bureaucracy that ensured uniformity of directives and propaganda goals; work units and publishing houses that ensured compliance with directives by issuing materials, determining what gets published, and regulating access to educational materials and other media; fine arts institutions to homogenize artistic styles and methods and ensure that artists only employed Party-approved styles; and State-owned distribution to minimize the availability of materials that the Party did not sanction.

The Communist Party bureaucracy was massive. Its endless hierarchy of departments and sub-departments played an important role in the development and implementation (or non-development and non-implementation in many cases) of the arts. Julia Andrews produced a diagram listing the most important parts of the bureaucracy during the period 1949-1979 in her book *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China*, which I have adapted for reference below:<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing* p. 80

<sup>27</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics* p. 6



Party directives regarding propaganda goals were conveyed to artists, fine arts institutions, and presses via this bureaucracy. In order to ensure continuity between the civil administration and the party administration, key administrators help appointments in both the civil and party branches of government.<sup>28</sup> The bureaucracy was not nimble. Administrators on the lowest level would hold meetings to explain assignments. Problems or questions with directives would require deliberation on the part of administrators, who were always reluctant to give a concrete decision. Often, issues would have to move up the ladder of the bureaucracy until a sufficiently powerful and influential administrator could give a final decision. The problems inherent in this bureaucratic system were a popular subject for art and literature after the Cultural Revolution, when such criticisms became permissible.<sup>29</sup>

The most important organization in a Chinese worker's life was the work unit (*danwei*). Fine arts institutions and publishers directly employed professional artists and writers who were particularly proficient and cooperative. The Chinese Artists Association or the Chinese Writers Association employed the most accomplished of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 5

<sup>29</sup> Numerous examples of these kinds of works can be found in *Stubborn Weeds* (see above, note 11)

these artists and writers. These prestigious positions allowed for a number of rare privileges, such as access to restricted materials (foreign or political literature, for example) and opportunities to travel to other cities or even in rare cases to other countries.<sup>30</sup> However, many artists and writers could not support themselves on the income from their writings or artwork alone, and were employed by different work units (factories, for example), submitting their artistic contributions through that unit's propaganda department, or submitting stories for a pay rate per thousand characters.<sup>31</sup> The work unit had considerable power over the lives of all Chinese workers, and art workers were no exception. Julia Andrews writes: "The power of the work unit to affect both the daily private life and the creative life of the individual artist effectively prevented extreme forms of professional or social behavior, including open political dissent. In essence, the work unit policed the attitudes and daily behavior of its employees and punished those who committed infractions."<sup>32</sup> In addition to providing housing, food rations, and authorization to marry and reproduce, work units were the mechanism by which party directives reached art workers. Work units would provide assignments and materials, and a studio to carry them out.<sup>33</sup> In addition, affiliation with a work unit is often what gave workers in the literary field access to library materials, which unlike the Western library system, was not a universal right. Work units and powerful individuals had priority over library materials and a ration of journals, and work units concerned with education or propaganda had the best access

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<sup>30</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature* p. 118-119

<sup>31</sup> References to artists' and writers' wages can be found in Andrews *Painters and Politics* p. 5-7 and Link *Uses of Literature* p. 120, 129

<sup>32</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics* p. 5-7

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

to these resources, even access to some restricted materials.<sup>34</sup> If one of the principle goals of Socialism was to prevent workers from being alienated from the means of production, alienating intellectuals from the means of their production was certainly not a consideration. The advantage of this system was that the administration's control over the artist's resources as well as the uniformity of artist's daily lives ensured compliance with party directives. If an art worker did not produce a work that suited the needs of the party bureaucracy, or worse, produced a work that diverged from party ideology, not only would their unit not recommend the work for publishing, the artist also risked receiving punishment.

The motivation for many artists and writers, naturally, was to be published and recognized for their work. The desire to publish their work accounts for a great deal of cooperation with Party policies on the part of writers. One way the administration controlled what stories were published was by allocating paper to publications' editorial boards. The State Publication Administration, which checked for materials that would be potentially unhealthy for the masses to read, allocated the annual amount and quality of paper that publishers could use.<sup>35</sup> Naturally, publishers who were most cooperative would receive more paper at better rates. Artists also desired recognition among their audience and peers. In socialist China, recognition of excellence in art was not under the purview of popular opinion, private organizations, or peer review. Rather, prizes for particularly exemplary work were awarded through the Ministry of Culture, which was a part of the government bureaucracy.<sup>36</sup> In this way, policy makers ensured that artists received recognition based on art that complied

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<sup>34</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature* p. 172-173, 190

<sup>35</sup> Link, Perry *Stubborn Weeds* p. 17

<sup>36</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics* p. 66



with ideological and stylistic guidelines rather than artistic excellence or stylistic innovation.



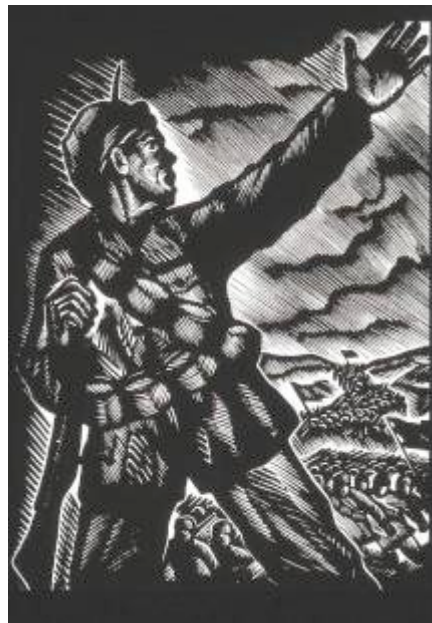
**Figure 6: Example of New Nianhua, *Through Cooperation, the Electric Light Was Fixed*, Zhang Yuqing, 1957**

The lack of stylistic innovation was not only the result of carefully and deliberately meted-out recognition on the part of party bureaucracy. The institutions where artists and writers received training and the styles they taught were also a homogenizing factor. Early on, if an artist wanted his work published, only three styles were acceptable to the regime: *nianhua*, woodcuts, and *lianhuanhua*. Only after 1952 did the party begin to tacitly accept the traditional landscape painting style, *guohua*, as well as oil painting.<sup>37</sup> *Nianhua*, or “new year’s pictures,” is a term for pictures produced to celebrate good fortune and wealth at the end of the year. They traditionally feature themes like plump babies, fat fish, gods of wealth, or any

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 74

combination of the three. Because popularization was a key goal in early socialist art, artists adapted the technique into “new *nianhua*,” a simple, dark outlined, flat-colored technique that was favored in the CCP over more technically demanding techniques like oil painting. However, because it is such a simple technique, artists tended to look down on it.<sup>38</sup>



**Figure 7: Example of 1930s Woodcuts, *Call to Arms*, Huang Xinbo, 1936**

Woodcut artistry is an ancient technique that socialist artists adapted for their purposes. Artists had already adapted this technique to form the “agitational style” that characterized the wartime woodcut prints of 1930s and early 1940s (ex., Figure 7). Typically, these prints were dark and moody; in other words, totally unsuited to socialist realism as it was described at the *Yan’an Talks*. Iris Wachs writes in her paper “Themes, Style, and the Historical Background,” “...the use of chiaroscuro, large areas of black, and portrayal of the masses as debased and oppressed--characteristic of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 60

this art in the 1930s and 1940s; had been deemed in the *Yan'an Talks* to be unsuitable for art intended for the masses, and these characteristics had been removed from the category of acceptable styles.”<sup>39</sup> No longer able to use the techniques they had used in the 1930s and 1940s, artists like Zhao Zongzao, who had committed themselves to the Communists’ cause, adapted woodcut techniques to be less dark and more cheerful—more in the spirit of socialist realism (Figure 8).



**Figure 8: Zhao Zongzao, *Go to Vote*, 1953**

Similarly in literature, writers who had produced work with darker themes during the 1940s changed styles in keeping with the spirit of socialist realism. For example, the writer Ding Ling grew famous after publishing her story "Miss Sophie's Diary" in 1927. This somewhat sarcastic and ultimately fatalistic work is about a young woman who lives alone and suffers from tuberculosis. Despite being very lonely and depressed, she deliberately eschews her friends’ attempts to cheer her up. She remains prideful throughout the story even though this feeling ultimately fills her with a sense of self-loathing. This work would definitely not have been appropriate for publication under the socialist system. However, being an ardently faithful

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<sup>39</sup> Wachs, Iris *Half a Century of Woodblock Prints*, “Themes, Style, and the Historical Background” Online: [http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00\\_01/chinesewoodblock/index.html](http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00_01/chinesewoodblock/index.html)

believer in the communist cause, Ding Ling varied her style to produce acceptable works. Her efforts culminated in the novel *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River*, which won her the Stalin Prize for literature in 1951.<sup>40</sup> Her 1940 story “When I Was In Xia Village”<sup>41</sup> is about a woman from a small village who was taken by the Japanese and contracted a sexually transmitted disease when she was forced to serve as a “comfort woman.” She becomes alienated from nearly all the other people from her village, as she has the stigmas of having been sexually enslaved and having learned to speak Japanese. Though in the end she goes to Yan’an with the prospect of treatment and an education, the focus of the work is still the gloom and intolerance she faces. By contrast, Ding Ling’s 1954 work, “The Trial” is an account of a village undergoing land reform, and the “trial” of a deposed landlord, who is subjected to beating, humiliation, and the division of his property among the villagers. Despite a widespread desire to kill the landlord, the villagers show him mercy and allow him to live with his son, who is a member of the Eight Route Army. The stylistic differences between “When I Was in Xia Village” and “The Trial” are vast, and demonstrate how the imposition of the socialist realist aesthetic can affect the individual writer. The earlier work, “When I Was in Xia Village” is considerably more sophisticated in its dialogue and descriptive techniques, reflecting the broader scope allowed for creativity in writing. “The Trial” exhibits no qualities that indicate that it is the work of any particular writer. This is to be expected given the demand for popularization over quality in socialist literature of the period.

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<sup>40</sup> In an action typical of the Communist party, she is later expelled from the party, labeled a rightist in 1957, reformed, and expelled again during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>41</sup> Lau, Joseph and Howard Goldblatt. *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. “When I Was in Xia Village” p. 143

Obviously, one main concern from the perspective of artists is the homogenizing effect these controls could exert on the development of styles and themes. Does this level of control over artistic and literary production destroy creativity? Mao Zedong addressed this question at the *Yan'an Talks* when he said:

It's true that empty, dry, and dogmatic formulas will destroy creativity, but more than that, they will first destroy Marxism-Leninism. Dogmatic Marxism-Leninism is not Marxism-Leninism at all but anti-Marxism-Leninism. Then Marxism-Leninism won't destroy creativity after all? Yes, it will, it will definitely destroy feudal, bourgeois, petty bourgeois, liberalist, individualist, nihilist, art-for-art's sake, aristocratic, decadent, pessimistic, and other kinds of creativity that are alien to the popular masses and the proletariat.<sup>42</sup>

Mao did not entirely dismiss the importance of aesthetics, however. He acknowledged that art that lacks artistry cannot be effective, despite being politically progressive.<sup>43</sup> Despite Mao's willingness to acknowledge these concerns, in actual practice, party policies could be very harmful to creativity. In some cases, homogenization of styles and art creation in response to party directives still led artists to produce very similar works. Figures 9 and 10 are just two examples of an extremely common phenomenon.

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<sup>42</sup> McDougall, *Talks at the Yan'an Conference*, p. 83

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78



**Figure 9: Artist Unknown, *Joining the Young Pioneers*, 1980**



**Figure 10: Artist Unknown, *I Have Put on the Red Scarf*, 1983**

One of the factors dictating the party's policies on art and literature, reflected in the various movements toward liberalization and crackdown, was a constant balance of artistic proficiency pitted against the danger of regarding aesthetics *too* highly, at the expense of the political message.

## Secondary Uses of Socialist Propaganda

"A struggle began to rage deep inside me: how could two diametrically opposed 'truths' coexist in the world? The longing of the peasants were one truth, and the policies of the higher-ups and the propaganda in the newspapers were quite another."<sup>44</sup>  
-Liu Binyan, "Listen Carefully to the Voice of the People"

One possible way of studying socialist art and literature is to regard them as social documents. After all, these works reflect patterns of life that very few outsiders could experience before China "opened up" during the late 1970s. Unfortunately, given the nature of socialist realism, the assumption that art and literature reflected actual daily life is simply false. Instead of regarding this non-representational character as a disadvantage, however, scholars can instead use it as a tool for gauging actual conditions. For example, if one examines the reactions that people who lived through the Cultural Revolution have to Cultural Revolution-era propaganda, and finds that the reactions are generally cynical or derisive, one can conclude that the "representations" are particularly non-representative. I have also found that discussing reactions to revolutionary propaganda is a generally innocuous method of broaching the subject of a person's personal history, which is useful for gaining an understanding of an era from the "unofficial" perspective.<sup>45</sup>

From the perspective of art and literary workers, propaganda had the important effect of serving as a barometer that measured changing "weather." In *Evening Chats in Beijing*, Perry Link describes the process intellectuals used to read the *People's Daily* (official newspaper) "upside down" in order to get its real meaning, as well as a

<sup>44</sup> Liu, Binyan, Link, Perry, ed. *People or Monsters?* "Listen Carefully to the Voice of the People" (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1983) p. 3

<sup>45</sup> Based on a conversation I had with Zhao Tianqi, a Beijing artist with whom I discussed modern Chinese art and its propagandistic influences and elements. Summer 2004

sense from the ubiquitous wall slogans of what party leadership wanted of intellectuals.<sup>46</sup>

High-level political leaders had another use for propaganda as well: support in factional struggle. One example is the struggle between Zhou Enlai (who represented a limited amount of liberalism when it came to the arts) and Jiang Qing (Chairman Mao's wife and sycophant, who was the ultimate conservative when it came to the arts). Zhou Enlai supported producing apolitical, pleasant works of art to serve as a bridge from the CCP to the outside world, while Jiang Qing regarded this effort as an incursion into her territory, namely the realm of the arts. As a result Zhou was subject to attacks on his policies via black art exhibitions, which were exhibitions of art of which the party disapproved. These exhibitions involved criticism, self-criticism, and confessions on the part of the offending artists.<sup>47</sup> Propaganda and factionalism is discussed in more detail below, particularly in the section regarding Cultural Revolution-era propaganda.

Another use of propaganda, which is possibly the most obvious, is aesthetic pleasure. Many people found propaganda posters in particular to be aesthetically pleasing, as indicated by their ubiquity as home decorations.<sup>48</sup> Often, propaganda posters were the only exposure that common people had to art. Xiaomei Chen describes her appreciation for the posters as art in China "Growing up with Posters in the Maoist Era" despite having become disillusioned with their message: "...I did not find them offensive. No longer crediting their spirit or content, I still, to some extent, appreciated posters as one of the few public artworks available in an era when there

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<sup>46</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing*, p. 176

<sup>47</sup> Andrews, Julia F., *Painters and Politics* p. 368-376

<sup>48</sup> See Figure 5



were plenty of sculptures of Mao but few art museums.”<sup>49</sup> One could interpret the fact that she appreciated them on an aesthetic level and ignored their ideological content as an indication that posters did not successfully serve their ideological or political functions. I regard it as more likely, however, that this testimony is an indication that there are other, more insidious forces at work. If people appreciate the posters for their artistic content and do not pay too much attention to their ideological function, their political message may be absorbed in an unconscious manner. This suspicion is at least partially confirmed, as both Xiaomei Chen and Anchee Min report having an overwhelming desire to “be just like” the shining, idealized image of a revolutionary female worker they encountered in posters.

Other potential secondary uses of socialist propaganda were, to a limited extent, vicarious experiences on the part of the audience. Stories that featured heroism were popular, perhaps owing to the reader’s ability to imagine himself defending the motherland against Japanese invaders, or doing other heroic deeds in the name of Socialism. Particularly in the Modernization era, posters that featured modern machinery, big cities, and foreign cultures were a factor in helping Chinese people come to terms with modernization and western influences.

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<sup>49</sup> Evans, Harriet, Stephanie Donald, ed. *Picturing Power In the People's Republic of China* “Growing up with Posters in the Maoist Era” (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham MD, 1999) p. 109

## Propaganda from 1949- 1966

“It is a mass culture that emphasizes content over form, use value over exchange value, a participatory communal action over heterogeneous everyday life. Hence, such a mass culture is profoundly romantic in its form and utopian in its vision; it is necessarily didactic rather than entertaining, production-oriented rather than consumption-oriented.”<sup>50</sup>

-Xiaobing Tang in *Chinese Modern*

Initially, propagandizing communist ideals and revolutionary theory was closely linked with education and efforts to combat illiteracy, an effort that continued throughout the revolutionary era. From 1935 to 1945, the “Yan’an Era,” propaganda was systematized “...into a comprehensive framework that gave printed material more transformational, agitational and administrative dimensions.”<sup>51</sup> Since the party consolidated artists and the means of artistic production and systematized propaganda, propaganda effectively became a byproduct of the interplay between Mao’s revolutionary ideals and the bureaucratic administrative structures that carried out his directives.

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<sup>50</sup> Tang, Xiaobing *China Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000) p. 283

<sup>51</sup> Landsberger, Stefan *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization* (M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 1995) p. 28 \*Note: since both this work and Michael Wolf’s book are both entitled “Chinese Propaganda Posters,” I will henceforth refer to this work as “From Revolution to Modernization.”



**Figure 11: Yu Yunjie, *Helping Mother Acquire Culture*, Date Unknown**

The first notable propaganda campaign of following Liberation corresponded with the Korean War and the contemporaneous drive for economic reform. The Korean War, or "War to Resist America and Aid Korea," was portrayed as a just, humanitarian cause. Not surprisingly, Chinese propaganda stresses the Chinese role in the conflict, portraying the volunteer army as doing most of the fighting. In this campaign, one can already see Chinese artists taking the Soviet idea of socialist realism and implementing it with specific goals; namely, drumming up domestic support for the war by portraying heroic military models for emulation. It is not difficult to discern the relationship between the campaign for increased industrial production and support for North Korea. In some posters, increasing industrial production is associated with a patriotic duty to aid Korea against American imperialists. The effect of this campaign on artists was extensive because of the xenophobia that the Party promoted. Artists were forced to substantially reduce foreign (particularly Western) influences on art, leading to support of native styles like

*nianhua*. This campaign represents the early trend toward actively repressing artists' expressive, creative tendencies. In earlier instances of propaganda implementation, artists followed general guidelines set forth by the party like, "art must serve the people," and "learn from the proletariat." This relatively minor campaign begins the cycle of control and repression that characterizes the major social movements of socialist history.

One such major social movement with wide-ranging consequences was the Hundred Flowers Campaign. "Let a hundred flowers bloom: let a hundred schools of thought contend" was a policy that encouraged intellectuals to criticize the party and progress toward Socialism. It was also an opportunity for artists to explore new modes of artistic expression. The campaign lasted from 1956 roughly until the summer of 1957, after which the amount and scope of the criticisms exceeded Chairman Mao's tolerance for them. Iris Wachs' paper *Themes, Style, and the Historical Background* compiles the main points of a leading Chinese Artists Association cadre Zhou Yang, describing the new liberal policies of the Hundred Flowers:

In the struggles of the past when the situation was tense, it was required that artistic and literary activity be coordinated with urgent tasks at a definite time and place, so as to produce an immediate political agitational effect among the masses" (p. 181). But "the broad masses of artists and writers have now become more closely united on the basis of a common idea of serving the people" (p.180). Unfortunately, however, "doctrinairism ... in literature and art ... [has] seriously restricted the creative freedom of artists and writers" (pp.180-181). "Doctrinairism ... manifests itself in vulgarizing and over-simplifying the Marxist view of aesthetics, and putting fetters and constraints on

artists" (p.181). "In the choice of subject-matter and form, [artists] should be given an ample measure of freedom (p. 182).<sup>52</sup>

The origin of the Hundred Flowers Campaign is an interesting topic that provides insight into the initially fruitful but ultimately tenuous relationship China had with the Soviet Union. The inspiration for the policy that Mao expounded upon at the *Yan'an Talks*, socialist realism, was originally a Soviet creation. The policy was originally outlined as early as 1917 during the Bolshevik October Revolution and was later altered after Stalin's death at the Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1954.<sup>53</sup> The policy, which originally read, "Socialist realism, the basic method of Soviet belles-lettres and literary criticism, demands of the artist truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. At the same time, truthfulness and historical concreteness of artistic representation of reality must be combined with the task of ideologically remolding and training the laboring people in the spirit of Socialism," was reiterated in 1954 with the second sentence omitted.<sup>54</sup> This reflected an increasingly tolerant atmosphere in the Soviet literary sphere following Stalin's death. What is surprising, however, is that despite the close relationship between Soviet and Chinese art policy up to this point, the change was not mirrored in China, at least not immediately, even though Chinese artists and writers continued to study in the Soviet Union until 1957. A brief examination of the timeline reveals a lag in the relaxation policy: Stalin's death, March 6, 1953; about nine months

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<sup>52</sup> Wachs, Iris *Half a Century of Woodblock Prints*, "Themes, Style, and the Historical Background" Online: [http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00\\_01/chinesewoodblock/index.html](http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00_01/chinesewoodblock/index.html)

<sup>53</sup> Swayze, Harold *Political Control of Literature in the USSR, 1946-1959* (Oxford University Press, London, 1962) p. 36-39

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 113-115

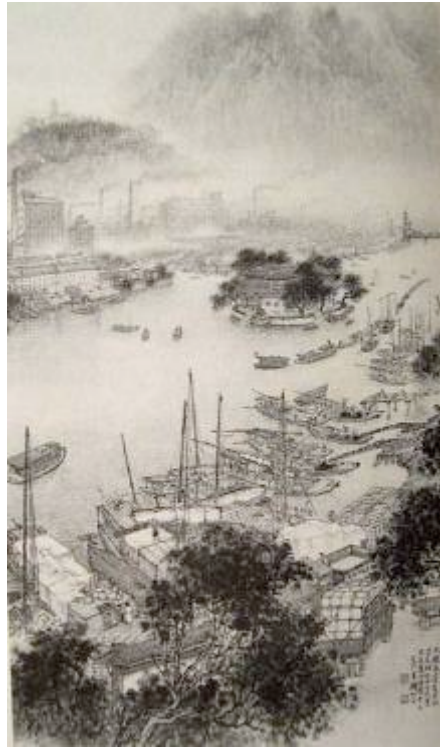
later, the Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, December 15, 1954. It was not until 1956 that the CCP began actively relaxing controls over intellectuals. Perhaps one could understand the Hundred Flowers Campaign as an extension of the relaxation of controls over Soviet writers. Another explanation is that Mao Zedong, planning for rapid economic development and requiring the cooperation and technical talent of non-party intellectuals, sought to gain it by ordering bureaucrats to relax controls over the arts.<sup>55</sup> Yet another explanation is that Mao used the Hundred Flowers Campaign as a deliberate trap to flush out opposing elements among the intelligentsia. Most likely, as with many historical events, the campaign was a result of a confluence of these factors.

The results of this campaign were many. Writers published stories that criticized the ineffectual bureaucracies and the extremes of party control. They produced some of the most liberal literary works in the entire period from 1949 to the appearance of scar literature in 1977. Artists used the liberal period as an opportunity to break free of their stylistic limitations. *Guohua*, the traditional form that artists originally used mostly for painting landscapes underwent a revival. Under the principle Mao Zedong expressed at Yan'an, "We do not by any means refuse to use the old forms of the feudal class and the bourgeoisie, but in our hands these old forms are reconstructed and filled with new content, so that they also become revolutionary and serve the people,"<sup>56</sup> artists sought a compromise. Artists used the *guohua* style to convey socialist realist images, like in the 1958 ink on paper drawing *On Furong Lake* by Qian Songyan (Figure 12).

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<sup>55</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics*, p. 180

<sup>56</sup> McDougall, Bonnie S. *Talks at the Yan'an Conference*, p. 65



**Figure 12: Qian Songyan, *On Furong Lake*, 1958**

The image, though traditional in style and materials, shows an industrial and ostensibly prosperous town. Factional rivalries stemming from stylistic differences, which the homogenizing effect of party restrictions on style had largely suppressed, reemerged. By far the most important result of the Hundred Flowers Campaign was an opportunity on the part of artists and writers to resume a more traditional role as guides on the forefront of morality and society, rather than mere bureaucratic tools with no autonomy. The newfound liberalism and the resulting expressions of dissatisfaction with aspects of the communist regime coupled with growing factionalism among students and administrators who began to emphasize individualism, technique, and reputation<sup>57</sup> were the impetuses for one of the most infamous and traumatizing campaigns targeting intellectuals: the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957.

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<sup>57</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics*, p. 209

In June 1957, Chairman Mao began a movement to purge the perceived "rightists" that had polluted the quest for Socialism. Was this movement Mao's deliberate trap for "anti-party" elements, or had the reaction to suddenly-loosened restrictions been more virulent than Mao had anticipated? In either case, hundreds of thousands of writers, professors, economists, and scientists suffered criticism, incarceration, forced labor in the countryside, or they committed suicide. Even worse, many of those who received the "rightist" label were not necessarily guilty of attacking the party or undermining the revolution: many "rightists" were branded based on anonymous and possibly unfounded accusations. Many work units punished "rightists" because the units were forced to uncover a certain quota of criminals to denounce, regardless of whether or not they had any criminals to denounce.<sup>58</sup> The Anti-Rightist movement was a major blow to intellectuals' status and any remaining shreds of their traditional role as moral guides at the pinnacle of society. The Anti-Rightist movement was also an early lesson to all artists and writers: one cannot implicitly trust that policies allowing greater freedom of expression and trends toward liberalism will not suddenly reverse course, wreaking havoc on all those who participated and many who did not. Those who were lucky enough to escape the rightist label learned to take material, careerist, and personal safety considerations over artistic integrity.

After 1957, Maoist artistic and literary policies are either actively anti-intellectual or passively so. These policies were a departure from the contemporaneous Soviet model of socialist development. The Soviet model stressed full utilization of technical expertise while maintaining control over art and literature. But in the wake of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the anti-intellectualism of

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 209



following campaigns, Mao persecuted all types of intellectuals, leaving him in tune with the party's large peasant base but with a severe dearth of technicians and professionals to drive modernization. Interestingly, throughout the Anti-Rightist movement, most writers and readers did not attribute the problem of "anti-party" elements to problems within the party itself; instead, they assumed that there genuinely was a problem with their own attitudes.<sup>59</sup> This tendency is one of the factors that allowed the cycle of relaxation and repression to continue throughout the social movements since 1949, and it is what ties the cycle to socialist artists and their traditional notions of the morality of the state and the ideal intellectual. After the disastrous famine of the Great Leap Forward, however, intellectuals began to suspect that the problem might be from above and not from within.

One can best understand the Great Leap Forward not as a single campaign, but as a "spirit" and set of priorities. The goal of the GLF was to accelerate the normal stages of economic development by forcing extraordinary effort on the part of the masses, communalize agrarian production, and surpass Great Britain in steel production within 15 years. The basic belief was that the Chinese people could overcome technological limitations by virtue of sheer will power and revolutionary zeal. Naturally, one of the main methods by which the party intended to meet these goals was to depend on the supporting propaganda campaign. Stories that glorified communal life dominated literature. Socialist realist, larger-than-life peasants, steel workers, and soldiers in dynamic, idealized poses done in the *nianhua* style dominated the posters of the era. Common themes are that of bountiful harvests (Figure 14), successful communal farm life, or quality steel production (Figure 13).

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<sup>59</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing*, p. 140



**Figure 13: Song Enhou, *Again Good Quality Steel*, 1959**



**Figure 14: Jin Meisheng, *The Vegetables Are Green, the Pumpkins Big, the Harvest is Bountiful*, 1959**

These images were thoroughly disconnected from reality. The economic policies of the Great Leap Forward, initially problematic and disruptive to agrarian production, collapsed into large-scale disaster as a combination of man-made and natural factors led to famine. Cadres, faced with extremely poor crop performance and low quality steel output, were not eager to admit having failed their objectives and therefore over-reported their harvests. Naturally, increasingly deluded members of the party leadership demanded even higher increases in crop yields and more steel production. These historical facts present a case wherein propaganda did not succeed in its objective, but also its effect (i.e. encouraging production at all cost) may have been to worsen an already disastrous situation.

Party policies emphasized the role of workers, peasants, and soldiers (*gong, nong, bing*) in shaping Chinese social consciousness. The effect of this policy on primarily urban writers and artists was forced development of a proletarian

consciousness (or at least the appearance of it). To facilitate this process, the party tried the two-pronged approach of forcing artists and writers to spend part of their time working alongside peasants as well as train worker and peasant-class students in the fine arts institutions. During the Great Leap Forward, much of the artistic productivity of professional artists went to aiding workers and peasants in the creation their own works. Amateur art produced by the masses was featured and praised in journals and in exhibitions throughout 1958 and 1959, and many amateur artists became famous.<sup>60</sup> The national goal was to attain a student body comprising 60-70% peasant-class students within five years; by 1958, 80% of the entering class were of the worker or peasant class, and all but the old or weak artists were required to engage in manual labor in the countryside.<sup>61</sup> While the Chinese communist revolution was largely centered on the glorification of peasants, and indeed had its roots in the rural population, the intelligentsia were still necessary for their administrative and technical talents, creation of art and literature, and scapegoating in the event of policy breakdown. So, a major objective in art policy was not just to promote economic goals, but also ideological goals; namely to promote proletarian consciousness among the intelligentsia and reduce the gap between the urban educated and the rural peasantry. Evidence suggests that these goals met with very limited success. Kenneth Lieberthal writes in *Governing China*, “Despite intensive political indoctrination, the intelligentsia continued to regard most cadres from the countryside as bumpkins. The peasants, in turn, regarded intellectuals as elitist and ‘bourgeois’”<sup>62</sup> Obviously, this

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<sup>60</sup> Wachs, Iris *Half a Century of Woodblock Prints*, “Themes, Style, and the Historical Background” Online: [http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00\\_01/chinesewoodblock/index.html](http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00_01/chinesewoodblock/index.html)

<sup>61</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics*, p. 211, 225

<sup>62</sup> Lieberthal, Kenneth *Governing China*, p. 100

contact between artists and writers and peasants did not have the intended effect. Forcing artists and writers to appreciate and glorify peasants was a factor in their growing disillusionment with the Communist régime. Intellectuals wanted to support the party and support Socialism, but the spirit was killed as soon as they were forced to study the peasantry up close and found ignorance, prejudice, and superstition.<sup>63</sup>

Another major change for artists and writers during the Great Leap Forward was due to the Sino-Soviet split: the deliberate distancing from Soviet arts theory and the introduction of Chairman Mao's new artistic and literary theory, revolutionary romanticism. Mao considered socialist realism inadequate and called for its replacement with this new, more visionary style. Stefan Landsberger, the noted collector and propaganda poster scholar writes in *Chinese Propaganda Posters: Revolution to Modernization*, "Clearly, the non-Soviet element of romanticism was introduced to make the arts more visionary, in order to imbue the population with the necessary spirit of self-sacrifice, hope and enthusiasm to overcome concrete obstacles by pure will power. At the same time, this eliminated the inappropriate gloominess often found in 'pure' Soviet Socialist Realism."<sup>64</sup> One argument in favor of this new policy was that revolutionary romanticism raises the quality of creative writing because it allowed some scope for the imagination.<sup>65</sup> While this statement is true, this by no means equaled increased artistic freedom. Works from this era were particularly divorced from reality. The disconnect inherent in revolutionary romantic images portraying prosperity during the economic disaster of the Great Leap Forward was another factor in the growing disillusionment among intellectuals with communist

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<sup>63</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing* p. 137

<sup>64</sup> Landsberger, Stefan *From Revolution to Modernization*, p. 38

<sup>65</sup> Huang, Joe C., *Heroes and Villains*, p. 244

party leadership. The stories and poems that praised the Great Leap Forward exemplify a point at which actual reader preferences (what readers wanted to read) and prescribed reader preferences (what the Party wanted readers to read) diverged and called revolutionary idealism into question.<sup>66</sup> In short, the Great Leap Forward, with its massive economic collapse and human tragedy coupled with its idealized representations of prosperity and growth was the point at which most artists and writers began to see flaws in its Party's directives.

By 1960, two years after the Great Leap Forward began, an estimated 16.5 to 40 million had died<sup>67</sup>, and flaws in the Great Leap Forward were unequivocally apparent. The policies that led to this disaster were reevaluated throughout 1961-1965 and many were cancelled. Fine arts institutions began to encourage professionalism over amateurism, creating a period of renewed activity for China's professional artists.<sup>68</sup> The period after the Great Leap Forward and before the Cultural Revolution, called the "period of relaxation" or "period of consolidation," was a generally liberal and prolific time for both art and literature. For writers, this was a good time because political controls were unusually loose. Many writers whom the party had labeled "rightists" in 1957 had that stigma removed; in addition, a movement towards the use of "middle characters" (characters who were neither bad nor good—generally frowned upon for strict socialist realist/revolutionary romantic works) allowed for the production of more representative literature, i.e. literature that better corresponded to

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<sup>66</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 67

<sup>67</sup> Harms, William *The University of Chicago Chronicle*, "China's Great Leap Forward," March 14, 1996, Vol. 15, No. 13 Website: <http://chronicle.uchicago.edu/960314/china.shtml>

<sup>68</sup> Wachs, Iris *Half a Century of Woodblock Prints*, "Themes, Style, and the Historical Background" Online: [http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00\\_01/chinesewoodblock/index.html](http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/exhibits/00_01/chinesewoodblock/index.html)

actual reader preferences.<sup>69</sup> Artists used the liberal atmosphere to promote the political correctness of using traditional artistic forms like *guohua* for ideological purposes. Artists still had to serve their political purposes, but during this period, their methods were increasingly diverse. A fascinating and eerily beautiful example of *guohua* being used for propaganda purposes is *Celebrate the Success of Our Atomic Bomb Explosion* by Wu Hufan (Figure 15), which was conspicuously a testament to both China's newfound technological prowess as well as self-reliance, having not depended on the Soviet Union for nuclear technology.



**Figure 15: Wu Hufan, *Celebrate the Success of Our Atomic Bomb Explosion*, 1965**

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<sup>69</sup> Link, Perry, ed. *Roses and Thorns: The Second Blooming of the Hundred Flowers in Chinese Fiction* (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1984) p. 15

Famine, economic disaster, break off from the Soviets, and the reorganization of Great Leap Forward policies in 1961 allowed for an oasis of creativity among China's artists and writers resulting in exhibitions, liberalization of editorial policy in the journal *meishu*, and a surge in landscape painting production.<sup>70</sup> This respite had the effect of fostering factionalism in art and literary circles as well as in government. With the massive failure that was the Great Leap Forward looming over him, Mao can either blame his own policies or blame other, more nebulous factors that allegedly corrupted his goals like reactionary bourgeois influences in the arts and science, the ideology of bourgeoisie infiltrating the bureaucracy, flaws in the educational system, and reformist tendencies among his political rivals.

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<sup>70</sup> Andrews, Julia F., *Painters and Politics*, p. 297-298

## The Rise of Jiang Qing and the *Yangbanxi*

“当这种新文学，新语言，新文艺出现时，也有片刻新鲜感，但最终掩盖不了其自身的贫乏和苍白。当时最新鲜的语言，很快就令人们感到乏味，久而久之感到缺氧，窒息。”<sup>71</sup>

— 杨建著，《文化大革命中的地下文学》

In late 1966, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee, as well as magazines, newspapers, art and literary journals, and book publishers were either co-opted by the Cultural Revolution Group, of which Jiang Qing was then deputy Chief, or disassembled outright. It is an historical irony that at the beginning of Jiang Qing's involvement in the Communist party in the 1930s, one of her functions was to protect "...modern artists from the KMT's [Nationalist Party] crude censorship of unorthodox books, their destruction of avant-garde art, suppression of innovative films, and curtailment of liberal education."<sup>72</sup> How was it that a lover of drama, fan of Western films, a defender of the arts, and a once celebrated actress became the chief henchwoman responsible for one the most culturally oppressed periods in Chinese history?

For reasons that will be detailed below, reliable early accounts of Jiang Qing's early life and career are rare; however, by the early 1930s, she was already part of early communist movements fueled by resentful and often poverty stricken youths committed to anti-Japanese imperialism and proletarian class consciousness. She was involved in "guerilla performances" to raise money to support resistance activities, as

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<sup>71</sup> Yang Jianzhu, *Underground Literature of the Cultural Revolution* (Zhaohua Publishing Company, Jinan, 1993) p. 18 "When this kind of new literature, new language, new arts appeared, there was a feeling of newness; but eventually one could not conceal its pale monotony. At that time the new language very quickly caused people to become bored and, as time passed, suffocated."

<sup>72</sup> Witke, Roxane. *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing*. (Little, Brown, Boston 1977), p. 99-100



well as educational programs that were actually communist education programs in disguise. Part of her role in the Party was to teach night school at the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the activities of which had little to do with Christianity, and much to do with anti-imperialist, communist political education. Despite the protection offered by the YWCA's prominent international profile, Jiang Qing participated in these movements at great personal risk. She was, in fact, imprisoned by the GMD in 1934 for suspected underground communist activities. Differing accounts of how she managed to escape serious punishment reveal that information regarding her early life is unreliable. In the canonical biography of Jiang Qing, *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing*, written by Roxanne Witke and based on numerous interviews, Jiang Qing maintains that she relied on her foreign contacts within the YWCA to get out of jail as a last resort.<sup>73</sup> In *Ten Year History of the Cultural Revolution*, however, Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao write that Jiang Qing was released only after having written the following confession: "I have never participated in the Communist Party. Communism does not conform to the Chinese national character, and in the future I absolutely will not participate in Communism."<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the truth is somewhere in the middle; after her foreign contact guaranteed her innocence, she was required to sign a standard anti-communist document before being allowed to leave. In any case, Jiang Qing is certainly reluctant to mention that detail later in her career.

In 1937, she moved to Yan'an, acting and teaching at the Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Arts. By 1938, she was living with Mao, and they married in 1939.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 94

<sup>74</sup> Gao Gao and Yan Jiaqi, *Wenhua dageming shiniandai (A History of the Decade of the Cultural Revolution)* (China Issues and Research Publishing Company, 1986), p. 403

She was his fourth wife. Their marriage was from the beginning politically controversial. Because party activities were not centralized and generally poorly organized, Jiang Qing's party history was unverifiable and thereby suspect. Coupled with her status as an actress (a suspicious class, often associated with criminals, itinerants, and prostitutes), it is clear that many did not approve of Mao and Jiang Qing's marriage. Both because of her dubious political status and Mao's discouragement, she was initially not involved in land reform, and had difficulty gaining acceptance among Mao's contemporaries. After an extended illness and convalescence in the USSR, in 1949 she finally gained the opportunity to participate in promoting land reform, along with the wives of other leaders. In 1950, she engaged in the censorship of sensitive films, eventually attaining the position of Director of the Cinema Department of the Propaganda Department. In Witke's biography, an inside account of how a Hong Kong film, *Inside Story of the Qing Court*, came to be banned gives an interesting glimpse into the process of censorship during this early period. Surprisingly, the process itself was not unilateral. The relative merits and flaws of the film were the subject of meetings of cultural administrators, writers, and historians who, in theory, were to collectively decide whether the film was to be banned or continue to be allowed to show. Unsurprisingly, however, when the collective conclusion failed to support Jiang Qing's initial opinion, she used her personal authority to ban the film anyway.<sup>75</sup>

During the most of the 1950s, Jiang Qing played no major political role. Due to a combination of health problems, the pressures of her administrative duties, and the power politics of ambitious political rivals, Jiang Qing was sequestered in Moscow with limited access to political news and cultural materials from 1951-1953. As her

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<sup>75</sup> Witke, Roxane, p. 236

condition worsened with what Chinese doctors would diagnose as cervical cancer in 1956, she was forced to return to Moscow for radiation treatments, from which she would recover in 1959. During her recovery, her doctor recommended that she see shows to keep her mind off of her physical condition. Her shock and anger at what she perceived as deeply problematic “ancient and bourgeois plays” inspired her to concentrate on her recovery so that she could devote herself entirely to cultural work.<sup>76</sup> The result three years later in 1962 was the influential “May 16<sup>th</sup> Circular,” a prelude to the Cultural Revolution; and four years after that the Second May 16<sup>th</sup> Circular, which essentially set the Cultural Revolution in motion politically. Her involvement in these pre-Cultural Revolution activities would prepare her to be on the forefront of cultural policy making. It was during a “Military Art and Literary Workers Talks Summary” meeting, February 2-20, 1966, that Jiang Qing first announced to the military, the party, and the country that arts policy would be under her guidance from then on; she thus, “...became the leader of the Cultural Revolution and mounted the stage of Chinese government.”<sup>77</sup>

How was it that Jiang Qing, who was not only largely excluded from cultural policy-making since marrying Mao Zedong up until 1966, when she was named advisor to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), became the leading figure on cultural work? Complete domination of cultural policy, which Jiang Qing wielded during the Cultural Revolution, was predicated on her ability to supersede Peng Zhen, mayor of Beijing who opposed her early efforts to establish model operas, Liu Shaoqi, Chief of State who was later labeled “traitor” and “capitalist roader,” and Lin Biao, leader of the PLA. Jiang Qing was not able to advance any of her policies without an official

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 303

<sup>77</sup> Gao, Yang, p. 386

high rank, which she attained from Lin Biao in the PLA in exchange for influence she might have with the Chairman.<sup>78</sup>



**Figure 16: Artist Unknown, *The invincible thought of Mao Zedong illuminates the stage of revolutionary art!*, Late 60s,**

Along with a no doubt genuine desire to reform the arts to serve socialist goals, Jiang Qing had other designs once she attained political power: to erase evidence of her dubious past and retaliate against her past enemies. Among her first actions was to have her 1930s history cleared away by intimidating previous acquaintances into destroying old pictures and other materials, systematically using her power to subject old rivals to criticisms or imprisonment, and having their houses sacked by Red Guards, eventually having them burned. Yan and Gao write in *Ten Year History of the Cultural Revolution*, “Jiang Qing always had a special relationship with her 1930s Shanghai contemporaries in the drama industry, and they all knew her deep secrets; as a result, therefore one by one their mouths were shut as they met with struggle sessions and labor reform.”<sup>79</sup> Though her roles as an actress undoubtedly contributed

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<sup>78</sup> Witke, Roxane, p. 318

<sup>79</sup> Gao, Yang, p. 408-410

to her political mystique and charismatic personality, it is ironic that Jiang Qing spared no effort to divorce herself from her movie star past.

Jiang Qing also used her political power for retribution. Control over film and opera meant that she had the ability to decide whose works could be singled out for criticism. As a result of systematic censorship and ideological attacks, she could use a combination of official channels and Red Guard mob force to ensure that the influence of her enemies from her early career would be erased. These enemies, Tian Han, Xia Yan, Yang Hansheng, and Zhou Yang, labeled the “Four Villains,” were condemned, and forced to parade around with a sign around their neck with their names literally stricken through. Even drawing attention to her acting past in a positive manner was taboo, as one unfortunate film critic who praised her role in the film *Blood on Wolf Mountain* in a film encyclopedia found out. He was targeted during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>80</sup> Besides erasing her past and enacting vengeance, Jiang Qing had very specific ideas about how arts policy should complement Mao’s political goals. The most important theoretical concept that shaped Jiang Qing’s policies was that entertainment that contained references to “feudal” Chinese life, superstitions, and “demons and ghosts” would produce backward, superstitious citizens. Modern entertainment that glorified bourgeois, Western lifestyles (like that of Shanghai in the 1930s, in Jiang Qing’s mind) would produce citizens without proletarian consciousness. Her solution to the problem in late 1966 was to ban all theatre and film productions and replace them with her model works, the *yangbanxi*.

According to Yang Jianzhu in *Underground Literature of the Cultural Revolution* (*Wenhuadageming zhongde dixia wenxue*), there were 327 plays and operas widely performed in 1965. He writes, “Among these [327 plays and operas],

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<sup>80</sup> Witke, Roxane, p. 134

there were 122 plays, 33 operas, 76 Beijing style-operas, 96 local-style operas, and 10 other kinds. Among these 327 works, 137 were large scale productions, and 190 were small to medium size productions.”<sup>81</sup> When the Cultural Revolution formally began, and the Cultural Revolution group gained control over play, opera, and film production, over the period of ten years, there were only a handful. The *yangbanxi* generally refers to the “original” eight model operas, ballets, and symphony that were produced in the first two years of the Cultural Revolution, but there were a few other model works produced later in the Cultural Revolution as well. The original eight model works include two ballets: *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun*) and *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nv*); five Beijing operas: *Shajiabang*, *Sweeping the White Tiger Regiment* (*Qixi baihutuan*), *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu weihushan*), *The Harbor* (*Haigang*), and *The Legend of the Red Lantern* (*Hongdengji*); and one symphony, *Shajiabang*.

In creating the *yangbanxi*, Jiang Qing emphasized destruction over creation. It was not only her intention to eliminate feudal and bourgeois influences in the entertainment sphere, but also most of the traditions and social institutions that supported negative influences. As a result of her policies, individuality, realism, and innovation were replaced with communal action, revolutionary romanticism, and aesthetics that were by the end of the Cultural Revolution considered banal. Much the way poster artists used traditional styles with historical and cultural precedent in woodcuts and new years art, the dramas of the Cultural Revolution exploited the dominant style of traditional Chinese opera. Certain elements of traditional dramatic style were preserved in the *yangbanxi*, to accommodate the tastes of the target audience, that is the masses, many of whom had never been exposed to styles of drama

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<sup>81</sup> Yang Jianzhu, p.11

outside the traditional regional dramas. Similarly, Western influences mainly in the area of music (the symphony *Shajiabang* is essentially a Western-style symphony) and stage production techniques were not categorically rejected. Jiang Qing seemed to have embraced the philosophy of "...in our hands these old forms are reconstructed and filled with new content, so that they also become revolutionary and serve the people."<sup>82</sup> Jiang Qing gave her specifications to commissioned professional writers either to create new dramas based on recent revolutionary history, or to modify older dramas to conform to the new aesthetic of the proletarian arts. Actors were also expected to maintain an intimate connection with the masses for whom they were to perform. Witke writes, "To spread Communist ideology and to narrow the class breach between professional artists and working people, troupe members typically were divided into four teams that were dispatched to perform among workers and peasants on a rotating basis. The same format was aggressively and broadly used during the Cultural Revolution."<sup>83</sup>

The *yangbanxi* glorified the proletariat, Mao Zedong Thought, and the Party. None of the settings in any of the ballets or operas predates the CCP. Though an epic portrayal of the Long March or some other historically significant Communist accomplishment would seem to thematically fit into the model works, no landmark events and no powerful political individuals such as Mao himself appear in the model works. This was almost certainly because no actor was up to the task of portraying the Great Helmsman to the standards of the deified leader portrayed in other forms of propaganda. Though Mao himself was not portrayed on stage, unmistakable allusions

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<sup>82</sup> McDougall, Bonnie S. *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1980), p. 65

<sup>83</sup> Witke, Roxane, p. 383

to his presence such as his quotations, or imagery of the rising sun are common. The aesthetics of the operas bear a strikingly (but not surprisingly) strong resemblance to those of propaganda poster images. The characters are either unfaltering heroes or unmitigated evildoers; their heroic poses often prominently feature their fists, as opposed to the delicate, elegant hand gestures of traditional opera; and their gaze is frequently upraised and hopeful. The similarities between the different forms of media, operas, ballets, posters, and literature are a testament to the homogenizing influence of arts policy in Mao's China.

The ballets incorporate a number of styles, including traditional folk dance and international ballet as well as the aesthetics of socialist realism. The aesthetics are manifest in the colors that dominate the stage, the poses and gaze of the actors, as well as its ideological content. The color red, the symbolic color of the communist party, is used frequently, primarily as an emphasis on ideological purity of certain characters. In *The Red Detachment of Women*, Wu Jinghua, the female protagonist, wears a bright red shirt even while she is still a slave, symbolizing her inner revolutionary spirit. Similarly in *The White-Haired Girl*, Xi'er wears a full costume of red, not only helping to differentiate her from other dancers on an often-crowded stage, but also showing her revolutionary potential. The use of color is particularly interesting in *The White-Haired Girl*. In the ballet, red is the traditional color of happiness and joy during the New Years season, but it is also the modern referent to the glory of the Communist Party. When she hides in the mountains, she loses color: her hair turns white, and clothes are also devoid of color, representing not only her separation from society, but also an ideological void waiting to be filled. When she joins the revolution, going back to her town to confront her oppressors, she is given a red scarf to cover her white hair as a red sun breaks through the clouds, and a red sun later rises



to be worshipped after the evil landlords are executed.<sup>84</sup> The color black, the symbol for negative social elements, is often found on villainous characters like landlords. This red/black dichotomy is consistent with the political labels of five black categories (*heiwulei*) (landlords, rich-farmers, anti-revolutionists, bad elements, and right-wingers) and five red categories (revolutionary cadres, workers, poor peasants, families of martyrs, and families of the military) used during the Cultural Revolution.

The heroic poses actors make on the stage are a stylistic holdover from traditional opera. In the model ballets, heroic poses mark important moments, often turning points in the narrative. It is a notable phenomenon because it simultaneously demonstrates the influence of dramatic tradition as well as socialist realist aesthetics. An interesting by-product of the heroic pose is a moment of parallel between performance propaganda and propaganda posters, particularly with regard to the characters' gaze and the prominence of fists or weapons. (See Figure 17).



**Figure 17: Xi'er from *The White-Haired Girl* , 1972, and the poster *Promote the spirit of internationalism* 1965**

<sup>84</sup> *Baimaonv (The White-Haired Girl)*, VHS, 1972, 1:30:19

During these moments, the actor's head is almost always turned upward, gaze fixed on a distant horizon, a posture associated with revolutionary fervor in propaganda images. The gaze either conveys a spirit of resistance, a feeling of hope, or both. In *The Red Detachment of Women*, this "hopeful gaze" precedes every act of resistance during Wu Jinghua's initial escape.<sup>85</sup> When the leader of the red detachment of women, Hong Zhangjing is shot and captured and also when he is martyred by being burned at the stake he maintains a fixed, determined stare at the horizon, his fist raised in defiance. In *The White-Haired Girl*, Xi'er poses, brandishing her fist after her father Yang Bailao is killed.<sup>86</sup> The young male protagonist, Wang Dachun, who later becomes an Eighth Route Army leader, poses with an axe and revolutionary determination after henchmen kidnap his love interest for the landlord.<sup>87</sup> Though it is clear he wants to fight against the landlord, he is unsure how to proceed until an old man takes out the Eighth Route Army flag. The celebrated communist military division represents the path to salvation from despair for the young man, and the revelation is accompanied by a change in dance and music to a more militant style. The end of the sequence is marked by a march and a group pose like that described above.<sup>88</sup>

One of the most important aspects common to all of the model works is their ideological content. In some instances, ideology is manifested in extremely obvious ways, such as through the use of slogans. In *The Red Detachment of Women*, the slogan, "Only after liberating all of mankind can one finally liberate the proletarian self. –Mao Zedong" This quotation constitutes a summation of the overall message of

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<sup>85</sup> *Hongse niangzi jun (The Red Detachment of Women)*, VHS, 1972, 2:00-10:00

<sup>86</sup> *The White Haired Girl*, 21:00

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 23:42

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 24:38-26:00

the ballet; only after understanding this message is Wu Jinghua re-armed. Likewise in *The White-Haired Girl*, the cast sing “Mao, our beloved savior, he is our great sun” as the red sun rises. In content if not form, the model works are identical to the other art forms of this period, which is indicative of the aesthetic uniformity of the age. Ideological content could also take most subtle forms. In an interview, Xue Qinghua who played Xi’er in *The White-Haired Girl*, describes how through makeup and camera angles, her character was made to appear fat and healthy.<sup>89</sup> These methods intended to show that contrary to reality, even poor peasant characters were well-fed. The ballet *The White-Haired Girl* departs considerably from the original opera written by He Jingzhi published in 1944-45 and the version filmed in 1951. Though both the opera and the story are fundamentally anti-feudal and pro-communist, the ballet version concentrates on the injustices of landlordism and glory of reform under communist auspices at the expense of a treatment of a number of other issues like sexual abuse that are discernible in the opera. For example, in the ballet, the landlord fails to rape Xi’er, while in the story he impregnates her. With the addition of rape at the hands of the landlord, the resulting child, and the social consequences for Xi’er, the opera is a more complex, variegated treatment of the injustices of feudalism.

Aesthetically, the model operas are similar to the ballets. In *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, one finds many features that are both typical of Beijing opera and subtly influenced by socialist realism. For example, delicate hand gestures are traded for aggressive fists; actions like crying and sorrow were changed to reflect, “... how the working class cries;”<sup>90</sup> and a riding crop or a gun with a red streamer takes the place of a spear; the traditional roles in Beijing opera were only loosely filled; and the

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<sup>89</sup> *Yangbanxi (The Eight Model Works)*, Dir. Yuen Yanting, DVD, 2005, 07:00-07:30

<sup>90</sup> Witke, Roxane, p. 421

drums, gongs and cymbals were accompanied by western instruments. As in the ballets, color has important symbolic value: Chang, the peasant girl who joins the Liberation Army trades her peasant clothes for red clothes, for example. Characters on the stage are generally organized according to Jiang Qing's "Three Prominences," that is that among the masses, positive characters should stand out, among these positive characters there should be heroes, and among these heroes there should be superheroes. Evil characters are never allowed to advance to the front of the stage (see Figure 18). Subtlety is not a virtue when it comes to the ideological implications of the *yangbanxi*. Artifice was frowned upon, and simplicity was a virtue compatible with the needs of the masses. Straightforward storytelling, archetypal characters, and socialist realist aesthetics all played a part in ensuring that the propaganda message was understood and internalized.



**Figure 18: Yang Zuzhong dominates the front of the stage while the villains cower behind him. *Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy*, 1970**

Having exclusively dominated the performing arts sphere for all of the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Qing's *yangbanxi* were profoundly influential. Yet this influence did not necessarily correspond with Jiang Qing's expectations or intentions. The

*yangbanxi* had many implications that she did not expect. Perhaps the most important unintended effect of total control of the media was an unprecedented surge in the popularity of oral literature and other underground fiction. The trend was not only fueled by the lack of official, sanctioned entertainment, but also by the monotonous lifestyle of young intellectuals sent to the countryside. In *Underground Literature of the Cultural Revolution* Yang writes, “For researchers of Cultural Revolution history and the movement of young intellectuals to the countryside, the emergence of young intellectual song and poetry materials is precious—a genuine record of the reality of the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>91</sup> Young intellectuals in the countryside, many of whom were the most fanatic supporters of the Cultural Revolution, grew disillusioned with both socialist ideology and the promises of collectivized rural economy, as increasingly evident in their poetry. Underground literature represents catharsis in a monotonous and regimented life because it offers complexity and richness not found in the Cultural Revolution-era orthodox media: the conflict of human emotions, instability, and injustice. *The Second Handshake* by Zhang Yang is an example of this kind of underground story written during the Cultural Revolution; it was so popular that it continued to be copied and rewritten, from a 5,000 character version in 1964 to an 80,000 character version in 1973 and was ultimately published aboveground in 1979.<sup>92</sup>

The model works have had a lasting influence on those who saw them repeatedly during the Cultural Revolution, and for this reason remain popular to this day. The works are not popular for the reasons Jiang Qing might have hoped, however. In 2005, Hetty Naaijken--Retel Helmrich/Scarabee Films, a film production

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<sup>91</sup> Yang, *Jianzhu*, p. 137

<sup>92</sup> Link, *Uses of Literature*, p. 194-195

company from the Netherlands, produced a documentary called *Yangbanxi*, which followed ex-performers and interviewed fans in order to examine the durability of the *yangbanxi*'s influence. In one particularly trenchant interview, Xu Yuhui, a modern artist and fan of the *yangbanxi* explains why they were so popular at the time, "They [the model works] are deeply ingrained in my memory. When we watched the performances as youths, there were no other performances, only *yangbanxi*, so naturally they had a deep impact on us. We watched them quite happily... of course there was nothing else to watch."<sup>93</sup> Later in the interview he gives other insights into the popularity of the *yangbanxi*: for him it was the *yangbanxi* that gave meaning to the revolution, but for very unexpected reasons:

Xu: I liked them all, but I liked *The Red Detachment of Women* in particular.

Interviewer: Why that one in particular?

Xu: Because...well because...they wore very little...they wore comparatively little clothing! Well...there were...their thighs...with those stockings, their thighs peeked out. When we were young we were just beginning to have desires for the opposite sex starting with the *yangbanxi*. We found that in the midst of the Cultural Revolution there was something real and lively. That's how I understood the *yangbanxi*.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *Yangbanxi (The Eight Model Works)*, 16:30-16:51

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 17:01-17:42

## Art and Literature of the Cultural Revolution

“‘Scar literature’ only tells two-fifths of the whole story.”<sup>95</sup>

-Anonymous Engineer from Guangzhou

The ten-year “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” widely recognized as “the ten lost years” was a movement with causes and implications so complex that they defy summation. Nevertheless, an understanding of the basic mentality behind the movement is critical to understanding the propaganda media of the era and its effects. At the simplest level, the Cultural Revolution was a movement that Mao set in motion in order to consolidate his power, by removing competition and regaining control over cultural expression. Though Chinese historians generally recognize 1966 as the official beginning of the Cultural Revolution, warning signs of a severe crackdown on “reformist,” “liberal,” or “bourgeois” tendencies began in 1963 with the Socialist Education Movement. The purpose of the movement was to discourage liberal attitudes in the bureaucracy. This movement was abandoned in 1966 in favor of a more extreme solution to Mao’s problem of perceived rivals in the party. On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1966 Jiang Qing, under Mao’s direction, produced a paper entitled the “Second May 16<sup>th</sup> Circular,” which criticized Party Deputy Chairman Liu Shaoqi and General Secretary of the Communist Party Deng Xiaoping for allowing liberal reactionary elements take control of the media and being unfaithful to the proletariat.<sup>96</sup> Official criticism within the party was a serious matter, but it was only the beginning of Mao’s plans to regain control of culture. Mao again used broad populist support to legitimize his actions; this time he strategically supported student movements criticizing university leadership and founded the Red Guard movement. Chairman Mao used

<sup>95</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing*, p. 150

<sup>96</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics*, p. 317

these activist student supporters to achieve his consolidation over party and cultural control goals by mobilizing them in campaigns to overthrow party bureaucrats who were “capitalist roaders,” and to destroy the “four olds”: old ideas, old culture, old customs, and the old habits of exploiting the masses.<sup>97</sup> Red Guard Factions used this policy as justification to criticize, beat, publicly torture and humiliate party bureaucrats, professors, and anyone that was critical of the Red Guards’ arbitrary methods. The era was later characterized in (scar) art, (scar) literature, and personal accounts to be a most painful and difficult time for the families who were broken up, friends who betrayed friends to protect themselves, lovers forced to separate, and children “sent-down” to the countryside to uncertain fates, just to name a few themes. It was the most fiercely anti-intellectual period in modern Chinese history.

The Red Guard phase of the Cultural Revolution officially ended in 1969 when Chairman Mao declared the Cultural Revolution to be finished. However, the years after 1969 until Mao’s death in 1976 are considered part of the Cultural Revolution because of the continued criticism campaigns and controls on art and particularly literature. As a result, the Ministry of Culture, the Chinese Artists Association, and the Chinese Writers Association were all effectively defunct and these organizations were organized into “propaganda small groups”<sup>98</sup>; the educational system was completely disrupted and all universities closed down; and the communist party completed the monopoly on information as museums and libraries were closed. Despite these factors, the Cultural Revolution was a particularly prolific time for artists. However, because of the rampant anti-intellectualism of this era, it was a particularly bad time for writers. Literature during the Cultural Revolution was strictly regulated and

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 318

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 345-346



produced by committees.<sup>99</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, literary journals ceased publication. By 1972, the only literary magazine left publishing was *Chinese Literature*.<sup>100</sup>

This fact is significant because it is the first time in Chinese socialist history that propaganda art became the most favored method to transmit party ideology.<sup>101</sup> The art of the era, though abundant, was severely limited in terms of acceptable styles and scope of subjects. The emphasis was overwhelmingly on amateur art: technically simple with dominant, unambiguous ideological messages. The smiling image of Mao often participates in or overshadows many images, shining over crowds in the form of a sun, or represented by red flags or Little Red Books. “The Chairman Smiles,” an online exhibition of political posters from the International Institute of Social History gives the following apt description:

Designers use examples rather than an individual style, as individualism is not appreciated. Experienced designers have to work anonymously or in collectives, or are not allowed to work at all. Every detail has a distinct meaning on the posters. Gestures and grouping of figures in frozen poses often call to mind scenes from the revolutionary Beijing Operas. Red is the dominant colour on almost every poster. Every nuance of the ruling ideology is spread with an incredible intensity.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 113

<sup>100</sup> McDougall, Bonnie S. *Talks at the Yan'an Conference*, p. 39

<sup>101</sup> Landsberger, Stefan *From Revolution to Modernization*, p. 41. Dr. Landsberger was non-specific as to what constitutes “most favored.”

<sup>102</sup> International Institute of Social History: The Chairman Smiles, Online Poster Exhibition, Website: <http://www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/chairman/chnintro2.html>

In my description of Cultural Revolution art, I focus on three main themes: factional struggle and criticisms, the glorification of Mao and Maoist ideology, and the “Three Prominences.”



**Figure 19: Artist Unknown**  
*Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Are  
the Main Force in Criticizing Lin  
Biao and Confucius, 1974*

Political struggle among the leadership, ostensibly the main reason for the Cultural Revolution in the first place, spilled over among the populace in the form of criticisms and poster campaigns. These campaigns changed the “prevailing ideology” so quickly that posters would serve as a main source of information about what topics were politically dangerous. Popularizing these campaigns, mobilizing the masses lent political leaders the legitimacy to remove potential rivals for power in the party leadership, which included high level figures in the arts (and literary) bureaucracy.<sup>103</sup> One of the main promulgators of factional struggle were the Red Guards, whose ranks

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<sup>103</sup> Andrews, Julia F., *Painters and Politics*, p. 317

were swelled with university-aged youth following school closures. Red Guard artists were mainly involved in collaborative efforts, sometimes co-opting the skills of an art instructor when it came to rendering Chairman Mao's visage, which required skills beyond those of a typical Red Guard artist who had no formal training.<sup>104</sup> Examples of Red Guard art typically feature deific portraits of Chairman Mao, the ideological weaponry that were his quotations, and caricatures of fallen political leaders. Each Red Guard faction developed its own characteristics and methods, each believing that their methods best served Chairman Mao, which often led to conflict of interests, and violence.

One of the main campaigns to criticize political leaders was the "*pilin, pikong*" campaign, which was an attack on Lin Biao and Confucius, which resulted in many interesting posters during the period of a few months in 1973-1974. The attack on Confucius was a veiled attack on what Mao perceived to be reactionary elements (and potential rivals for power) in the party: Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping.<sup>105</sup> Kenneth Lierberthal writes in *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform* how Lin Biao's attempted coup ordeal played a role in discrediting both the Cultural Revolution and the leadership because the populace felt that the Cultural Revolution had been imposed upon them on account of power politics:

Suddenly, though, the propaganda organs put out the story that Lin had been a scoundrel all along and that Mao had always understood this. Mao had only *seemed* to back Lin in order to flush him out and expose his true colors.... Even people who had been persuaded to regard Mao as virtually a god...did not believe this new story. Lin's treachery,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 321

<sup>105</sup> Landsberger, Stefan, "Stefan Landsberger's Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages: Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius" Website: <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/plpk.html>

whatever it may actually have been, made cynics of many believers and greatly eroded the credibility of the entire leadership and its policies.<sup>106</sup>

This is early evidence that viewers were not passive subjects; propaganda campaigns could actually bring out the opposite of its intended effects, reflecting the attitude of cynicism toward invasive politics that increasingly characterizes the Chinese audience.

Amid all the factional struggle and policy attacks, one man remained beyond reproach: Mao Zedong. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's ubiquitous portraits came to symbolize his benevolent rule and guiding ideology. He appears continually, associated with grandiose landscapes; he is either bathed in the primary light sources of the work, or his visage itself represents the shining sun. If Mao himself is not represented, either his Little Red book, a pin with his face on it, or his ideology in the form of a quote is likely to appear. One of the most famous examples of art representing Mao in his heroic, transcendent role is *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* by Liu Chunhua. Julia Andrews writes, "With the publicity blitz of 1968, however, almost every Chinese with even the remotest interest in art became aware of *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*. The artist believes that nine hundred million copies were eventually printed."<sup>107</sup> This assertion is not difficult to believe, as a copy of this very work hangs above this writer's desk, 7,000 miles away and 37 years later. Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution iconography became so commonplace as to represent not just the Cultural Revolution era to later generations, but also zealotry of any sort, as evidenced by the commercialization of his image in the 1990s.

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<sup>106</sup> Lieberthal, Kenneth *Governing China* p. 118

<sup>107</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics* p. 336



**Figure 20: Liu Chunhua,  
*Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*,  
1968**

The third main theme in Cultural Revolution art is the “Three Prominences,” one of Jiang Qing’s revolutionary aesthetic principles. It was essentially a new extreme for socialist realist art beyond socialist realism and beyond revolutionary romanticism. One can see its influences in almost all examples of Cultural Revolution-era art: stress the positive (already a directive in socialist realism), stress the heroic (a directive for revolutionary romanticism), and stress the central heroic. This “technique” was mainly used to convey a very narrow range of ideologically safe subjects, which were politicized, stereotyped, and glorified to the extreme. Among these subjects were the “new socialist things, which included barefoot doctors (a term to describe a peasant who got basic medical training and then returned to the countryside and other areas where normal doctors were typically unavailable), revolutionary committees (political bodies that replaced the structures in place before

the Cultural Revolution), and “Up to the mountains, down to the villages” (a widely influential rustification campaign).<sup>108</sup>

The effects of Cultural Revolution policies and themes on artists and writers were extensive. Besides the fear and paranoia of everyday life that all Chinese people suffered through, artists and writers, who by nature of their profession dealt with matters of politics and ideology regularly, were in particular danger. The majority of artists and writers busied themselves tending to the precarious task of avoiding attack. One of the reasons that Chinese literature includes such a high proportion of short stories to full-length novels is that a story could be published before the “prevailing ideology” could change, while an entire novel might require too much time.<sup>109</sup> The primary goal of pragmatic artists became to please the leadership and to create exalted works of art to serve as “political capital” to protect him from future shifts in policy.<sup>110</sup> Despite their cooperation with Cultural Revolution policies, intellectuals in general were persecuted in this era. In 1970 all artists and writers were ordered to be “sent-down” to the countryside for peasant and military experience. The artists spent nearly all of their time performing manual labor, leaving little chance to paint or write. Being “sent-down” was a common-place phenomenon during the Cultural Revolution. Xiaobing Tang writes in *Chinese Modern*, “During the 1960s and 1970s, the ideologically sanctioned method of overcoming the difference between town and country...was to suppress non-farm employment or deurbanize society as a whole. A deeply entrenched agrarian tradition helped to justify an essentially anti-urban policy of modernization without urbanization, for urbanism was more often than not

<sup>108</sup> Landsberger, Stefan “Stefan Landsberger’s Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages: ‘New Socialist Things’” Website: <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/nst.html>

<sup>109</sup> Link, Perry, ed. *Roses and Thorns*, p. 9

<sup>110</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics*, p. 347 and 367

identified and condemned as the embodiment of evil modern capitalism."<sup>111</sup> Regular citizens increasingly were subjected to the kind of treatment that in previous decades had been reserved for intellectuals. This fact contributed to sympathy toward intellectuals and a general hatred the Chinese people had for intrusive political movements in the decades following the Cultural Revolution.

If an artist did happen to produce a work that did not fall within the narrow scope of acceptability, it was likely to be the basis for an attack. The purpose of the attack was not necessarily to punish artists—criticizing “black art” was one way in which Jiang Qing attacked Zhou Enlai in order to consolidate her claim on succession. Zhou Enlai supported exporting non-political (generally landscape) art to improve China’s international image. Jiang Qing selected paintings on the basis of being apolitical or catering to foreign tastes for criticism; even unpublished works were not immune from criticism. Jiang Qing claimed that maintaining a double standard in art was “counter-revolutionary.”<sup>112</sup> One form of attack was a “Black Art Exhibition.” Artists and their paintings were selected to serve as negative exemplars and warnings to other artists. In this way, even artists serving their duty to political leaders (namely, producing apolitical art for Zhou Enlai’s purposes) could be at risk of being labeled a counter-revolutionary and having to perform self-criticisms. The fact that the liberal faction (Zhou Enlai) wanted to export art and that the most conservative elements (Jiang Qing) were so fervently against the idea indicates that foreign views were an important consideration at the time. Art could be a natural bridge to foreign cultures. It has the distinct advantage of not being subject to linguistic barriers; its representations are a universal language.

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<sup>111</sup> Tang, Xiaobing *Chinese Modern*, p. 275

<sup>112</sup> Andrews, Julia F *Painters and Politics*, p 368-378



**Figure 21: Si Cong, *Warm Feelings*, 1977**

This quality is exactly what made it so appealing to liberal figures and alarming to conservative ones. It is clear from the outpouring of popular support after Zhou Enlai's death in January 1976 that his liberalizing influence was favored among ordinary people. This display of populist support and the related Tian'anmen protest in April 1976 was an overt sign that the Chinese people were more than ready for the oppression of the Cultural Revolution to be over.

During this time of extreme artistic and literary control, Chinese people still found ways to enjoy fiction with popular, apolitical themes. "Hand copied volumes" (*shouchaoben*) were a form of underground literature that existed during the Cultural Revolution to serve as retroactive insights into the interests of Chinese readers at the time. The themes of popular works were as mundane (to the western reader) as detective stories, personal philosophies, poetry, and pornography; yet readers and creators of hand-copied volumes could be severely punished.<sup>113</sup> This

<sup>113</sup> Link, Perry, et. al., ed. *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People's Republic* (Westview Press, Inc., Boulder, 1989) p. 19



phenomenon is significant because it represents a possible outlet for writers who otherwise had no opportunities to write in this particularly repressive era. One underground work, “The Second Handshake” was published aboveground in 1979, when literary controls were significantly less repressive, and it sold 3.3 million copies within a few months.<sup>114</sup> Significantly, few underground works were dissident; rather, writers simply took the opportunity to express their creativity and write (generally apolitical) stories people found entertaining.

By the time Chairman Mao died on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1976, the Chinese people had suffered many disasters as a direct result of his policies. Intellectuals had suffered particularly harshly. In order for modernization to occur, the status of the intelligentsia needed to undergo a complete re-examination. Naturally, this is exactly what occurred during the “Four Modernizations” era.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 20

## Propaganda of the Four Modernizations Era- Reform and Opening-Up Era

“Cities these days, like women, are just beginning to pretty themselves up, and already there are people who won’t sit still for it. That’s interesting.”<sup>115</sup>  
-Wang Meng, “Eye of the Night”

The Four Modernizations was primarily an era of repudiation and backpedaling. As the title of the movement indicates, it was ostensibly an effort to modernize four areas: agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. Main objectives included de-collectivizing agricultural production, decreasing state-owned enterprises by allowing the formation of joint ventures and foreign-owned enterprises, re-establishing educational institutions, and re-enfranchising intellectuals (previously “rightists”). In keeping with this theme, controls over the media were comparatively slight, allowing for a degree of freedom of expression not experienced in China for decades. Subjects of propaganda were generally urban and/or industrial and reflected new appreciation for modern technology. Targets of propaganda were increasingly diverse. Issues of ideology and policy were (with the exception of the one-child policy) generally non-invasive, such as education, morality, and safety. The role of political leaders in propaganda was vastly reduced as political leadership became less cabalistic and satisfied to govern from behind the scenes.

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<sup>115</sup> Link, Perry, ed. *Roses and Thorns*, p. 44



**Figure 22: Cheng Lizhi, *Closely Unite Around the Party Central Committee with Chairman Hua At the Head to Strive for New Victories* 1977**

After Mao's death in September 1976, Hua Guofeng succeeded him as party Chairman. Practically his first order of business was to imprison "The Gang of Four:" Jiang Qing, Yao Wenyan, Zhang Chunqiao, and Wang Hongwen. Despite this momentous victory for artists and writers to whom the Gang of Four represented the most conservative and pernicious oppressors of originality, in neither the art world nor the literary world was there an immediate outpouring of creative new works. This is for three principle reasons. First, artists and writers had long since learned from the Anti-Rightist movement and the Cultural Revolution to be cautious and distrustful when it came to change, particularly when change was in their favor. Liberalizing trends could just as likely be traps as they could be windfalls. Secondly, the new Chairman Hua was certainly an improvement over Chairman Mao in almost every practical aspect; however, Chairman Hua, perhaps in an attempt to secure legitimacy from remaining conservative elements of the party, actively maintained the same kind of image that Chairman Mao did. The posters that bear Chairman Hua's image, in many cases completely interchangeable with posters that bore Chairman Mao's image, best evidence this fact (See Figure 22). Lastly, artists and writers had out of self-preservation developed specific ways of producing art in order to stay under the

conservative (and punitive) radar. Self-censorship had been a significant factor in artistic and literary creation for decades, and continues to be a significant factor to this day. Moreover, many artists, particularly those educated during the Cultural Revolution, had been educated about certain state-approved techniques only, and therefore did not have a proper basis to be more expressive. The lack of stylistic variation is not surprising due to the homogenizing influences of Cultural Revolution-era artistic (non)developments, though the themes in art were increasingly apolitical.<sup>116</sup> The year 1978 was the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's political primacy as well as the beginning of Chinese economic reforms, and the year roughly corresponded with genuinely expressive works. It would take a few years of liberal, opening-up policies, palpable evidence of decreased political control over private life, and a few heroic writers to "test the waters" and publish risky works first.

Perry Link cites Liu Xinwu's "The Homeroom Teacher" (published November 1977) and Lu Xinhua's "Scar" (published August 1978) as two landmark works to "break significantly into forbidden zones."<sup>117</sup> These two works, "Scar" in particular, were responsible starting an entire genre of literature and art that released pent-up resentment at having suffered the extremes of the Cultural Revolution and previous punitive movements. Stefan Landsberger indicates that Lu Xinhua's "Scar" was partly responsible for the end of socialist realism as the "sole principle of creation in Chinese art," and the new use of "flashback styles" in painting and propaganda art.<sup>118</sup> It was not until Autumn 1979 at the Fourth Congress of the All-China Federation of Literature and Art Workers that there were concrete changes in arts policy. There were

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<sup>116</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics*, p. 384-85, 389

<sup>117</sup> Link, Perry, ed. *Stubborn Weeds*, p. 19 and Link, *Uses of Literature* p. 17

<sup>118</sup> Landsberger, Stefan *From Revolution to Modernization*, p. 79

two significant policy changes. First, around this time “art in service of politics,” a policy that had dominated since the *Yan'an Talks* disappeared from the media, later to be replaced by the more flexible “Literature in Service of the People and Socialism.” Second, artists and writers were assured that the extreme abuses of the Cultural Revolution, i.e. “cudgeling” (personal attacks), “capping” (labeling, like “Anti-Rightist”), and “grabbing of pigtails” (citing small errors to ruin one’s reputation), would all end.<sup>119</sup>



**Figure 23: Artist Unknown, *Smash the Gang of Four*, 1978**

Why did the Chinese government decide to relax controls over artists, writers, and intellectuals in general? After all, though Mao had died, he was an ideological pillar in the communist party. Later leaders would use his quotations and philosophies as legitimizing factors, as leaders still use them today.<sup>120</sup> With the infrastructure for control already in place, why was control reduced? One reason is that modernization was a primary priority. Just like during the economic reforms of the early 1950s, China needed to mobilize the intelligentsia because modernization necessitated their

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<sup>119</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 21

<sup>120</sup> See note 140

technical and creative skills. The communist party realized that attacks on artists and writers caused scientists and engineers to fear the universal anti-intellectual atmosphere that pervaded the Cultural Revolution era.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, to secure the cooperation of intellectuals in the sciences, the party needed to improve its relationship with artists and writers significantly. The change also reflected a conscious decision to shift focus from political struggle to economic/modernization struggle.

Another reason reducing restrictions on arts and literature was advantageous to the communist party is that by giving tacit approval to criticize former leaders, aspiring leaders could discredit any of their supporters who might be rivals for power. Deng Xiaoping welcomed criticism of the Gang of Four, "...so long as it did not go so far as to call into question the basic legitimacy of the regime he was inheriting."<sup>122</sup> Artistically this was a delicate balance of maintaining the previous leadership's (Mao's) image as a legitimizing factor for the CCP and at the same time repudiating the harmful mistakes of the past. In this way, contemporary leadership was able to acknowledge the tarnishing of the Party's image but also to shift focus from past mistakes and concentrate on modernization.

A third explanation for the liberalization in the arts is that it was a natural consequence of increased global awareness and economic reforms resulting from Deng Xiaoping's policies in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Some are quick to cite growth of the Chinese economy and increasing global awareness to explain the decline of the propaganda machine and the socialist literary system. After all, economic growth and globalism are palpable facts, readily observable, and widely

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<sup>121</sup> Link, Perry *Stubborn Weeds*, p. 23

<sup>122</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 123

celebrated as a logical approach to explaining increased liberties-- especially when increasing Western influences are also indicated. To be sure, market demands increasingly dictated the production of art and literature, especially during the 1980s. Moreover, the narrowing scope of political involvement in the daily lives of citizens during the Four Modernizations era precluded the production of propaganda with heavy political indoctrination themes that characterized the art of previous eras. But I would like to emphasize the role of an under-studied but ultimately critical factor in the changing art consumptive atmosphere: viewer preference.<sup>123</sup> From spontaneous social movements like the Tian'anmen protests on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1976 that mourned Zhou Enlai's passing and simultaneously showed support for his liberal influence, it is clear that general popular opinion agreed that the excesses of the Cultural Revolution must end quickly and that even those who previously supported the Cultural Revolution had long since become cynical about its ideals. It appears the effectiveness of propaganda art and literature had been overemphasized in any case. Xiaomei Chen (above) dismisses the spirit or content of propaganda posters in order to appreciate them as public artwork.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, the speed at which writers began to express bitterness over the suffering that the Cultural Revolution caused them indicates that the ideals of the movement had long since been lost on them; the propaganda had lost its effect or perhaps never had any effect at all. From this point of view, loosening restrictions on arts and literature was not just a strategic move to better exploit the expertise of China's scientists and engineers—it was akin to turning down the heat before the water boiled over. The fact that post-Cultural Revolution political leaders were able to maneuver deftly enough to both discredit the leaders who were ostensibly responsible

<sup>123</sup> Actual audience preferences is one area where research is sadly lacking. Hopefully I will be able to elaborate on this concept one day, after more research.

<sup>124</sup> See note 47

for the excesses of the past and still maintain their own legitimacy is a testament to how comfortable Chinese leaders were using the media to manipulate public opinion successfully.

From the standpoint of the Chinese Communist Party, the leadership had no reason to expect that intellectuals would not fall in line with their directives. In previous instances in socialist history during which the party persecuted intellectuals, intellectuals had always bounced back when the cycle of repression had run its course. After the Cultural Revolution, the CCP made certain new assumptions that were remarkably similar to the assumptions Chinese leadership had made throughout history, the Cultural Revolution-era excepted: first, that intellectuals and the bureaucracy were partners in effecting social change; second, that intellectuals symbolize the moral consciousness of the people and could speak for their desires; and third, that achieving modernity was the goal of the people and that intellectuals could lead this cause.<sup>125</sup> As it happened, these assumptions were accurate. By this time, however, intellectuals were very familiar with the concept of cyclical repression and freedom. One reporter says in *Evening Chats in Beijing*, “When the leadership ‘opens up’ and encourages you to talk, this is after it has made a calculation that the benefit of appearing to be magnanimous and open-minded will outweigh the damage that the free talking will bring. But when the limits are reached, then *that’s it*—no more talking.”<sup>126</sup> Even during this unprecedented period of artistic freedom, intellectuals had a cynical understanding of the system in which they operated—an attitude that would ultimately prove to be justified.

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<sup>125</sup> Zhang, Xudong, ed. *Whither China? Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2001) p. 14-15

<sup>126</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing*, p. 81



One genre that the party tolerated, “scar-literature,” portrayed loss, cynicism, and pain as a reaction to the Cultural Revolution as well as earlier movements. The name of the genre comes from the title of the story mentioned above, “Scar” by Lu Xinhua. Scar literature was significant for many reasons: its cathartic effect for millions of people who had suffered during the Cultural Revolution and the enormous popular support that it created. Perhaps most importantly, scar literature represented literature that people could actually relate to—the first literature that people really wanted to read in over a decade.<sup>127</sup> Despite the late 1970s liberal literary atmosphere, it has been observed that “scar literature” did not do the actual tragedy of the Cultural Revolution justice.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, works of “scar art” were comparatively innocuous when compared to the enormity of the event they represent. Self-censorship had always been a main method of control for the Communist Party, so it is not surprising that this deep-seated “instinct” would not immediately disappear. The control mechanisms that were in place were able to exploit the psychology of the Cultural Revolution era in that writers were concerned for their own safety and unsure as to what constituted crossing the line of acceptable expression. However, there were other forces at work. China, having just opened up to the rest of the world, found itself not only being exposed to foreign ideas and products, but also subject to the scrutiny of scholars who leapt on the opportunity to find out just what had been going on in China during the last few decades. The Chinese people, who had been victimized during the Cultural Revolution, were understandably reluctant to come out about it in a straightforward manner. A young writer in 1989 said, “All the world can read scar literature,” she said. ‘Chinese feel embarrassed to admit to others that such

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<sup>127</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 67

<sup>128</sup> See note 70 and Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing*, p. 151

uncivilized things happened in China. It doesn't matter that we intellectuals were the victims. We are still embarrassed for China to admit that it happened.'"<sup>129</sup> As appearance to the outside world became a factor, foreign exposure was not always a liberalizing influence—it could also be cause for reservation. Nevertheless, scar literature was a significant development; it signaled the beginning of author-oriented literary production, wherein authors produce what they wanted and not necessarily what they were told the masses wanted. Unfortunately, this trend was short lived. In keeping with the oscillating cycle of liberation and repression and with the tradition of invoking the desires of the masses, top leadership in 1980 decided that scar literature had served its purpose in discrediting Cultural Revolution ultra-leftists (and stopped the pot from boiling over) and that the masses no longer wanted to read depressing scar stories; they wanted to hear about the victories and heroes of the Four Modernizations.<sup>130</sup> This is yet another example of the party leadership using the will of the masses to justify control over the media.

During this decade of modernization, the targets of propaganda were more diverse than during previous movements. Instead of blanket ideological campaigns, the Propaganda Department increasingly chose to target specific groups like youth and women. The way in which certain groups were targeted and portrayed differed considerably from previous eras. For example, intellectuals and workers took on new roles in Four Modernizations-era society. The youth were regarded as the most important group for China's future progress. Inherent in this attitude was an impression that previous generations had already been "lost" due to disastrous political campaigns. Propaganda posters that targeted youth promoted broad moral values like

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 152; the same sentiment was expressed in Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 146

<sup>130</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 67

discipline, respect, and national pride as part of an attempt to create “socialist spiritual civilization” (Figure 24). During a general trend toward hygiene and cleanliness throughout the 1980s and continuing to today, children were used as spokes models. Perhaps the strategy was to promote the belief that if children can be upright citizens, then adults had no excuse not to follow suit. Other examples encouraged the study of science, reading of (state-approved of course) books, and promoting modernization in general.



**Figure 24: Artist Unknown,  
*Respect Social Morality*, 1984**

Posters that specifically targeted women were particularly prevalent in this era. In striking contrast with the more egalitarian images of women that Cultural Revolution-era posters promulgated, women appear to have been deliberately relegated to specific, limited areas of society and commercial sectors. The women in the posters of the 1960s and early 1970s were portrayed as equal partners in revolution, toiling alongside men in ideological, military, and agrarian struggle. Their

clothes were asexual in color and form, their hair often tied back in conservative braids. During the Four Modernizations era, on the other hand, images of women underwent “refeminization,” a theme reinforced by the reappearance of clothing in subdued colors and patterns generally recognized as feminine. In addition, women were often portrayed in increasingly domestic roles. Typical examples included women holding up pots and pans, serving dishes in a restaurant, or performing the duties of a nurse. As the economic rehabilitation of China became the CCP’s main goal, and productivity was a primary consideration, women were less favored in the industrial sphere. Promoting an egalitarian outlook on women’s status was de-emphasized.

Workers and peasants were less often the targets of propaganda in this era than in other eras. This is because during the Four Modernizations, the focus was on the urban, technological, and modern aspects of idealized Chinese society. In artwork regarding workers the concept of labor as a sacrifice for China’s development was replaced by more realistic representations. For comparison, Figure 25 below is a 1972 depiction of copper miners at work. Figure 26 is an oil painting of a steel worker in 1980:



**Figure 25: Wu Yunhua, *Fighting in the Copper Mine*, 1972**



**Figure 26: Guang Yanbo, *Steel and Sweat*, 1980**

Both are oil paintings depicting workers engaging in strenuous work in mining or metalworking. The differences between the two paintings are vast, and they reflect a revolution in how the mundane is represented in Chinese art. Notice that in *Fighting in the Copper Mine*, the title immediately stresses struggle and sacrifice. The workers' heroic poses are dynamic and energetic; their gazes are directed toward some distant horizon. They bask in the glow of an unseen light source, their sweat gives them a healthful sheen, and their faces reflect their determined revolutionary zeal for copper mining. The miner in the foreground holds his drill as if it were a rifle, and in the rock face are the invading Japanese, American imperialists, and all other manner of "paper tigers." By contrast the worker in *Steel and Sweat*, perhaps a foreman due to the whistle around his neck, sits with his shoulders slumped. His gaze is undirected, even absentminded. Revolutionary zeal is unmistakably absent. He sits in the glow of a forge, and its harsh light emphasizes the rivulets of sweat and the stains on his shirt.

In short, the principle difference between the two works derives from the era in which they were produced: *Fighting in the Copper Mine* is a socialist-realist work, while *Steel and Sweat* represents a kind of photo-realist oil painting that was popular in the 1980s.

Similarly, literary examples forego the idealized representations of peasantry in favor of a more realistic portrayal of their actual conditions. Interestingly, one story written in 1979, “The Girl Who Seemed to Understand” by Liu Zhen<sup>131</sup> gives a portrayal of peasant consciousness just before the Cultural Revolution, exploring the effects of the Great Leap Forward. It is difficult to say if the portrayal is truly *realist* or *realistic* because even the boldest instances of scar literature did not approach a truly realistic representation of Cultural Revolution tragedy.<sup>132</sup> Liu describes a peasant, Old Man Du, who is so beaten into docility and resignation by the extremes of land reform, famine, and exploitation that he develops a sort of psychosis of submission and guilt. The tragedy of his situation is that he is a model peasant: a selfless, hard worker, law-abiding, and humble. He should have been an exemplar for idealist communist policies. However, Old Man Du says, “‘I don’t know what ‘consciousness’ is. I used to believe in it, but then in 1960 I starved, and got starved out of my mind.’” Later in the story he says, “‘All I can do is work my guts out. I don’t know what all that about ‘contribution’ means.’” Instead, because of the corruption and incompetence that epitomized the actual execution of these policies, he may as well be a drone, with no concept of purpose, ideals, or goals.

The relationship between intellectuals and propaganda changed markedly from the Cultural Revolution during the Four Modernizations in that they were no longer

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<sup>131</sup> Link, Perry, ed. *Stubborn Weeds*, “The Girl Who Seemed to Understand,” p. 31-48

<sup>132</sup> See note 103

targets of attack. Four Modernizations-era posters depict intellectuals as important figures in China's development, and as models worthy of emulation. This trend had two goals: advocating and encouraging youth to engage in the sciences and convincing intellectuals spurned during the fiercely anti-intellectual movements of the past that the political climate was no longer hostile toward them and that they were vital to China's future development and prosperity. In the poster entitled *Make Many Contributions to the Four Modernizations in the Same Manner as Jiang Zhuying*, an optics specialist is pictured and the message overtly indicates that his example is to be followed.<sup>133</sup> In another poster entitled *Prime Minister Zhou Enlai Encourages Us To Do Research* and published in 1978, Zhou Enlai is pictured among school children who appear to be engaging in a project involving remote control models of planes and boats.<sup>134</sup>



**Figure 27: Artist Unknown,  
*Prime Minister Zhou Enlai  
Encourages Us To Do Research*,  
1978**

<sup>133</sup> Landsberger, Stefan *From Revolution to Modernization*, p. 128

<sup>134</sup> Wolf, Michael *Chinese Propaganda Posters*, p. 208

The image is significant not only because it promotes intellectual pursuits but also because it uses Zhou Enlai as the spokes person. By 1978, Zhou had been deceased two years. The CCP had in November of 1978 just reevaluated and legitimized the movement in Tian'anmen in 1976 as a correct revolutionary action,<sup>135</sup> which had been in part a movement to mourn Zhou Enlai's death as well as the death of his liberalizing influence. It appears that either the publishing date of this poster is incorrect or that publishing this poster was an extremely deft maneuver on the part of the leadership to capitalize on Zhou's newly restored reputation.

This poster portraying Zhou Enlai represents a then-rare occasion in which a political leader appears in a propaganda poster. Following Chairman Hua's brief primacy in the party, the de-facto leader was Deng Xiaoping. Deng was unwilling to perpetuate the phenomenon of leader worship like that during the Cultural Revolution and the "cult of Mao." Deng only appeared in propaganda materials when he felt it was necessary for him to establish his legitimacy.<sup>136</sup> Some exceptions were examples of art commemorating important events like the founding of the People's Republic or the deaths of influential theoreticians and socialist heroes like Marx and Lenin. In literature, top leaders rarely appeared at all. Leaders who had been influential in the "golden years" of the revolution in the 1950s and had subsequently run afoul of Mao's purges got some literary support in the post-Mao years.<sup>137</sup> In general, however, leaders did not play a major role in post-1978 propaganda.

The decline of the propaganda poster and propaganda in general began in the early to mid 1980s. The possible reasons for the decline are many. In terms of the

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<sup>135</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 118

<sup>136</sup> Landsberger, Stefan *From Revolution to Modernization*, p. 102

<sup>137</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 156



media's accessibility, people during this era had an unprecedented range of choices; thus one of the party's greatest assets when it comes to controlling media, the complete monopoly over its production, was weakened. In addition to radio, which had been accessible to some degree for decades, television and movies exploded in popularity. By 1982, the Chinese film audience was estimated to be 10 billion people (this statistic obviously reflects some individuals who were patronizing theaters multiple times), possibly larger than the audience for fiction was. Moreover, the messages behind some of the most popular movies were serious political commentaries that were critical of the party and state.<sup>138</sup> Given the option of being exposed to newly permitted risky unofficial political thought and the quotidian political indoctrination that propaganda media had come to represent, audiences preferred the former. The fact that film did not demand literacy of its viewer (though did passively demand Mandarin competence) was probably also a factor. Another reason the role of propaganda posters declined in the 1980s was the increased preference on the part of artists and audience for realism. This artistic trend, "new realism," was associated with scar literature because a typical theme for a "new realist" painting portrayed the human cost of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>139</sup> Attempts at introducing realism into official art were generally not well-received. One example is a version of the painting *With You in Charge, I Am at Ease*, originally painted by Peng Bin and Jin Shangyi in 1976. The 1978 draft painted by Han Xin and Wei Jingshan depicts Chairman Mao not disrespectfully, but realistically, showing him to be the frail, 83 year-old man he was in 1976. Though the Art Creation Office of the Municipal Revolutionary Committee approved the painting, it was removed from

<sup>138</sup> Link, Perry, et. al., ed. *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People's Republic* (Westview Press, Inc., Boulder, 1989) p. 39

<sup>139</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics*, p. 393

exhibition before the opening.<sup>140</sup> With regard to literature, besides market influences, the availability of semi-official and unofficial publications including Hong Kong and Taiwanese publications as a factor that undermined party control over literary content and production.<sup>141</sup> Semi-official and unofficial publications included student literary journals, tabloids, and unofficial literary magazines. Though the government tried with some success to suppress these materials by limiting their purchase of paper and use of printing presses, these materials remained popular due to the rise of commercial publishing.<sup>142</sup>

As the Modernization era transitional economy took its present thriving market-economy form, consumerism became an ideology unto itself. Perry Link writes in *Evening Chats in Beijing*:

...Chinese consumerism rebounded from the forced austerity of the Cultural Revolution period. But it was not just the shortages of the past that fueled consumerism; it was also uncertainty about the future. For how long will we have this opportunity to buy things? Deng Xiaoping is an old man; will state policy change again when he departs? The unpredictability of party policy in the past had encouraged in people a "get what you can while you can get it" approach to the market and, indeed, to life generally.<sup>143</sup>

With consumer ideology came consumer values such as the importance of quality and individualism. These demands increasingly dictated the course of the media as artists began striving to satisfy consumer preferences rather than political preferences. This

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 382

<sup>141</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 186

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 186-191

<sup>143</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing*, p. 70

phenomenon is evidenced by the appearance of commercial tabloids from unofficial publishers, which despite (or perhaps owing to) a 1986 official ban, continued to grow in popularity.<sup>144</sup> Similarly in the art world, artists operating outside official structures increasingly catered to foreign collectors, even spurning national exhibitions.<sup>145</sup> This commercialist attitude, a creative influence largely responsible for the diversity in the Chinese art and literary worlds, was ostensibly a significant factor in eliminating the communist party's mastery of the media and the monopoly on its application.

Changing values in post-Mao China is, happily, an area on which enough research has been done that one can draw concrete conclusions. "Value Change Among Post-Mao Youth: The Evidence from Survey Data," by Stanley Rosen is one such study. He first gives a number of prudent warnings about methodological problems that could complicate interpretation of the studies, including large numbers of non-respondents in politically sensitive surveys, difficulties in choosing appropriate samples, and survey design.<sup>146</sup> However, he draws interesting conclusions from the survey data that support the above claims regarding distaste for political influence in daily life and increasing commercial values. One survey examining the question "What Ideological Qualities Should University Students in the 1980s Possess?" shows that students valued personal intellectual prowess over political obedience. 58.6 percent of respondents indicated that "Dare to think and be good at thinking" was the most important, while only 3 percent of respondents thought "Listen to what the party says and be a revolutionary successor" was the most important ideological quality.

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<sup>144</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 188

<sup>145</sup> Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics*, p. 404-405

<sup>146</sup> Link, Perry, et. al., ed. *Unofficial China*, p. 194-200

The authors warned that this was a dangerous trend.<sup>147</sup> Another survey showed a deep distrust for cadres who have a great deal of influence over everyday life (like those who decide job allocations). “When asked their deepest impression of current cadres, the largest number (41.9 percent) chose “contemptible, hateful, and detestable,” followed by “other” (41 percent), and then “frightening” (10.2 percent). Only 2.5 percent chose “worthy of respect and approachable.”<sup>148</sup> To say that this distaste for political interference in everyday life is a reaction against the extremes of the Cultural Revolution might be premature, since this 1985 survey of college students reflects the opinions of students who would have been aged roughly 11-15 in 1976. However, the sentiment of hostility toward political influences in daily life is clear. In his conclusion, Stanley Rosen writes a wonderfully incisive statement about consumerism in post-Mao Chinese culture, “...the post-Mao ideological vacuum, which offers little policy justification beyond the development of the economy, had contributed to the use of money as a standard for success.”<sup>149</sup> This statement is not only true for many Chinese people, but also true for the Chinese government, the legitimacy of which increasingly relied on economic prosperity.

Stefan Landsberger writes of Chinese media in the 1980s, “...the well-organized system for propaganda, agitational and political education, modeled on the traditional and centuries-old Confucian mechanisms of social control, had to compete with the 'informal penetration of national sovereignty by electronic media, through mail flows, popular literature and other media likely to escape official scrutiny.”<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 201-202

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 202

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 212

<sup>150</sup> Landsberger, Stefan *From Revolution to Modernization*, p. 11

One explanation for the decline of propaganda is that propaganda like that of the 1942-1976 era is obsolete in a society that strives for modernization; and the propagated behaviors are irrelevant to changing economic realities. However, if one looks at the decline of propaganda through the scope of the roughly contemporaneous phenomenon of scar literature, scar art, and available survey data, it appears that the Cultural Revolution and other previous political factors contribute to an overall hostility toward invasive politics. In short, it is clear that Chinese society became hostile to penetrative politics rather than, or at least in addition to, simply getting too distracted by modernization to be concerned with it.

After the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign, the next major crackdown on the media was the Tian'anmen Incident in 1989. The intellectual atmosphere in China during the late 1980s was of increasing popular unrest. Student activists in support of democratic political reforms reacted to the death of Hu Yaobang, who was seen as a liberal influence in the party. Ostensibly a movement to mourn Hu's death, the student presence in Tian'anmen grew and their demands grew along with it. On May 20, the government declared martial law, but the protests continued. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, soldiers and tanks of the People's Liberation Army were deployed, and in the resulting violence, many student protesters as well as PLA soldiers were injured or killed. The scope of the crackdown proved not only the limitations on post-Mao freedom of expression (i.e. discussions of structural changes to the Party were forbidden), but also severely damaged China's international reputation. After the incident, there were no reforms in response to student demands. Stefan Landsberger writes, "In the second half of that decade [the 1980s], politically inspired printed matter almost completely disappeared, only to be reintroduced with a vengeance after the Tian'anmen incident of June 1989. Even then, however, propaganda posters had lost most of their previous staying

power.”<sup>151</sup> It is clear from the response among conservative factions in the Party that they blamed the liberal cultural trends in the period between the end of the Cultural Revolution and Tian’anmen for the 1989 incident. However, electronic media, value changes, cynicism toward intrusive political materials, and the new market economy all play a role in propaganda materials’ continuing decline.

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 14

## Contemporary Literature and Art

“Even political repression in China today bears a self-righteous air, as though its acceptance by the general populace testifies to the state’s mandate to achieve wealth and order through whatever means necessary.... As long as the government’s legitimacy comes exclusively from maintaining economic growth and social stability, its official ideology will remain a meaningless signifier awaiting appropriation by the newborn economic and class interests and positions in the differentiated social sphere.”<sup>152</sup>

-Xudong Zhang, in *Whither China?*

Before the mid 1980s, nearly all printed media was sold through the *Xinhua shudian* (New China Bookstores).<sup>153</sup> When market reforms allowed entrepreneurs the opportunity to run their own small bookstores and presses, distribution of the media was no longer under central control. That is not to say the content of media is not still under a measure of central control. As the Tian’anmen Incident in 1989 made abundantly clear, even in the new free market society, the scope of free speech is limited—license to publish is still controlled by the State Council. Some topics, especially those that could challenge the primacy of the Communist Party, but also information like the number of drug addicts, people living with HIV/AIDS, people executed each year, the seriousness of the unemployment problem, the frequency and seriousness of public protests, are all strictly controlled. Even information important to humanitarian efforts like the number of casualties from natural disasters was considered a state secret until only recently.<sup>154</sup> While by the 1990s the CCP no longer had firm control over artistic and literary spheres, propaganda never completely

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<sup>152</sup> Zhang, Xudong, ed. *Whither China?*, p. 5

<sup>153</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 168

<sup>154</sup> "Mistakes are Hidden by a Veil of State Secrets" by Frank Ching [http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/10/mistakes\\_are\\_hidden\\_by\\_a\\_veil\\_of\\_state\\_secrets\\_franks\\_ch.php](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/10/mistakes_are_hidden_by_a_veil_of_state_secrets_franks_ch.php), *China Digital Times*, October 1, 2005

disappeared. Indeed, walking around a major city like Beijing, one constantly encounters posters promoting *putonghua* (Mandarin, official dialect) or promoting patriotism, moral virtue, and sanitation. Some posters discourage littering, spitting, and even piracy (Figure 28). Though dissent-themed materials could never enjoy the same distributorship that state-sponsored propaganda materials received in the past, works of art and literature that do not coincide with Party preferences have found other markets.



**Figure 28: Artist Unknown,  
*Strike Hard at Piracy*, 1997/1998**

Perhaps the greatest contemporary change affecting Chinese media through the 1990s and today is the increasing accessibility of the internet. A full discussion of how access to the internet affects Chinese society and the degree to which it undermines state control over information is a topic for another paper (if not books). To summarize, however, the internet has become the arena for a constant struggle between authoritarian party structures that attempt to control information-- namely the State Council Information Office and the Ministry of Information Industry, and



increasingly tech-savvy Chinese internet citizens who often find ways to get around these controls. Xiao Qiang, a well-known human rights activist, writes in the *China Digital Times*, a weblog that concentrates on issues in China, “Since 1994, China's government has issued at least 38 laws and regulations aiming to control the Internet.”<sup>155</sup> The Party controls information posted on the internet based on a system that holds internet providers and hosting services responsible for the potentially sensitive content that their customers might post. Failure to remove sensitive content may result in financial penalties, or worse, loss of their business license. As a result, out of concern for their own pocketbook, providers hire censors to monitor and censor information based on a list of banned terms, a complete list of which was published in the *China Digital Times* on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2005.<sup>156</sup> The article also breaks down the 1024 term list into rough categories: *falungong* related ~ 20%; Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan ~ 15%; names of Chinese leaders and their relatives ~ 15%; democracy, corruption, politics ~ 15%; social unrest, police ~ 10%; names of dissident writers, political exiles ~ 10%; pornography related ~ 15% .<sup>157</sup> Western businesses, including Microsoft, Google, and Yahoo are eager to tap into the huge Chinese internet market and cooperate with and facilitate these repressive regulations. Control over the internet is not limited to a “cat and mouse” game of content posting and removal, however. Even attempting to post forbidden information can get one into serious trouble. Xiao writes, “Since 2000, China's police force has established Internet departments in more than

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<sup>155</sup> "China's Internet Censors Fight a Losing Battle" [http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/10/chinas\\_internet\\_censors\\_fight\\_a\\_losing\\_battle\\_xiao\\_qian\\_1.php](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/10/chinas_internet_censors_fight_a_losing_battle_xiao_qian_1.php) , *China Digital Times*, October 1, 2005

<sup>156</sup> "Translation of the Filtered Key Words in Chinese Cyberspace" [http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/06/update\\_the\\_filt.php](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/06/update_the_filt.php) *China Digital Times*, June 24, 2005

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

700 cities and provinces. The Chinese net police monitor Web sites and email for ‘heretical teachings or feudal superstitions’ and information ‘harmful to the dignity or interests of the state.’”<sup>158</sup> These measures make it difficult for Chinese “netizens” to post content, but from personal experience, I can say that accessing content is not very difficult. Getting around “The Great Firewall” is often a simple matter. For example, to access the forbidden BBC news website, one only needs to search for content using Google, and access the cache of the desired webpage. One could also use a proxy server to access webpages remotely. These techniques are well known to most foreign internet users in China, but it’s hard to say how many of China’s estimated 100 million web users use these methods. It is possible that many Chinese people do not even know that the firewall exists.<sup>159</sup>

Another phenomenon in contemporary Chinese media is “retro-Maoism,” or *Maore* that is evidenced even today by the ubiquity of his image (especially for the benefit of tourists) and his status as a pop-icon. In the early 1990s, images of Mao could be found everywhere: on t-shirts and talismans, in TV and movies, and on household items such as clocks. This sudden resurgence of Mao’s popularity seems directly opposed to the attitude that is hostile toward political images in everyday life; however, in “Redemption and Consumption: Depicting Culture in the 1990s,” Beijing University professor Dai Jinhua describes this new incarnation of the Chairman as the “cultural Mao Zedong,” as a manifestation of “the mutual coexistence of the ideological state apparatus and an emerging public space, two opposite entities that

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<sup>158</sup> "China's Internet Censors Fight a Losing Battle" [http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/10/chinas\\_internet\\_censors\\_fight\\_a\\_losing\\_battle\\_xiao\\_qian\\_1.php](http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/10/chinas_internet_censors_fight_a_losing_battle_xiao_qian_1.php), *China Digital Times*, October 1, 2005

<sup>159</sup> I know from personal conversations that many Chinese people who regularly access the internet were surprised to learn that the content was subject to government censorship.

cannot but deconstruct each other through several coexisting but conflicting sociocultural symptoms....”<sup>160</sup>



**Figure 29: Wang Guangyi, *Intel Inside*, 2001**

The commercialization of Mao’s image has an element that was missing in previous eras: personal choice. Today, the Chinese people can choose to buy a Mao pin, perhaps for nostalgic reasons, and not have to worry that not wearing one might indicate insufficient dedication to the Party. The popularity of his commercial image is actually against the spirit the Cultural Revolution-era representations, though ostensibly similar in appearance. Lending Mao’s image the most mundane artifacts hawked cheaply on the street to citizens and foreign tourists alike and distorting his image in artwork is a powerful humanizing factor. These tendencies refute the sanctity of his image while simultaneously acknowledging its power and nostalgic significance. The use of Mao’s image for commercial purposes is also indicative of

<sup>160</sup> Wang, Jing, ed. Gunn, Edward, trans. Dai, Jinhua *Cinema and Desire*, “Redemption and Consumption: Depicting Culture in the 1990s,” (Verso, London, 2002), p. 172

uncertainty on the part of the Party about how to represent Mao. Peter Hitchcock writes in an essay entitled “Mao to the Market:”

...while much of the ridicule heaped on Mao in images is an entirely understandable catharsis, particularly for those who were victimized in the Cultural Revolution, its playful exuberance is not out of step with current state ideology, which is mightily confused about how to represent Mao as anything other than the banal equivalent of Ronald McDonald [...]. In this respect, Mao is the agon of Chinese capitalism, the image about which globalization struggles to rationalize the inequities of the market to a fifth of the world's population.<sup>161</sup>

Despite the commercialization of his image, the Chinese Communist Party still openly uses Mao as a legitimizing element. President Hu Jintao said in 2003 on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mao's birth, “Mao is a matter of pride for the CCP, the Chinese people and the entire Chinese race. Whatever the time and whatever the circumstances, we must always hold up the great banner of Mao Zedong thought.”<sup>162</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, Chairman Mao and Maoist icons such as the “Mao suit” and the ‘Little Red Book’ were increasingly used in artwork as points at which Chinese consumers could confront memories of a revolutionary past as well as present consumer reality. Art critic and curator Zhu Qi writes, “One characteristic of post-political society was the erosion of the authority of political symbols. In Zhan Wang's [an artist known for this type of art] works, the Mao suit loses its air of uprightness, much as the integrity of many of China's intellectuals had withered. In some respects, Zhan Wang's Mao suits look like they have been both physically and spiritually disembodied and discarded in long deserted ruins, reflecting the loss of a once

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 278

<sup>162</sup> Rajan, D.S. "China: Signs of Ultra-Leftist Support to Maoists of India and Nepal" <http://www.saag.org/papers16/paper1565.html>, May 5th, 2005

powerful symbolic force.”<sup>163</sup> The comparison between communists’ past treatment of intellectuals and the new symbology of communist icons in contemporary art is an interesting one. Whether this art is in response to the commercialization of communist icons or a deliberate counterattack on the part of artists, it is indicative of a freedom and willingness on the part of artists to engage the topic of Communism in art without the guidance of the Party. Another well-recognized artist who created such works is Wang Guangyi. Born in Harbin in 1956 and a graduate of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, his paintings have been successful both domestically and in the foreign market. His work often depicts images strongly reminiscent or taken directly from Cultural Revolution-era propaganda and fuses them with registered trademarks or other readily recognized commercial images (Figure 29). This combination is a powerful one when one takes into account the widely recognized ideological authority that these images used to have. Similarly, these works effectively represent commercial icons and consumerism as a new source of ideology, a theme that also appears in late 1980s and 1990s Chinese literature.

One literary example is a short story “I Love American Currency”<sup>164</sup> (*Wo ai meiyuan*) by Zhu Wen, which was written in 1996.<sup>164</sup> The title “I Love American Currency” could be taken as an attempt to exploit shock value as a common marketing tactic but is also an immediate assault on any idealistic notions the reader may have about the character of urbanization or modernization in China. This title is well suited to the goals of this work, as it sacrifices sentimentality and romanticism for a more

<sup>163</sup> Hung, Wu, ed. *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West* (New Art Media, Ltd., Hong Kong, 2001), p. 50

<sup>164</sup> Wen, Zhu (朱文) “我爱美元” (“I Love American Currency”) ( Full text available, <http://book.5seecn.com/xd/z/zhuwen/wamy/001.htm>) Much my analysis of this work is taken from another paper I wrote regarding this work exclusively: "Critiquing Consumer Culture in Modern China: Zhu Wen's '我爱美元'"

real expression of the conflict between the old ideologies of state-managed economy and Socialism and the ideologies of consumerism, urbanization, and changing social values in response to the post-revolutionary market economy. In the story, a failed writer, attempting to express his love for his father, tries to find his father a sexual partner. Throughout the story the main character (who remains nameless, significantly) objectifies people, sex, all feelings, and ultimately his love for his father. Accepting sex and love as a trope for any other consumer good shows to what degree this character's ideals are based on a commercial consciousness. The main character ultimately objectifies himself when he defines his worth by a comparison to the cost of an expensive prostitute. He observes that she makes more in half an hour selling her body than he does selling a story that may take him months to write.<sup>165</sup> To him, price is the most honest measure of worth. What kind of value system does drawing such a comparison reveal? On one hand this sort of conclusion appeals to a biting, satirical sense of humor evident in Zhu Wen's earlier works, among which “我爱美元” is included. On the other hand, even though the juxtaposition of the prostitute and the writer leads to a logical/ideological conflict, it also indicates that Zhu Wen perceives a fundamental shift in Chinese culture, where value is assigned based on income, urban modernism is preferred over rural “backwardness” of the model socialist image of citizen, and post-revolutionary market economy is the progenitor of hopes and ideals. The story is an example of a post-revolutionary society straining to find meaning and gratification from a consumer ideology. Before modernization a writer's struggle was with an oppressive political system promoting homogeneity; now as a result of the new market economy and rampant consumerism, writers increasingly express dissatisfaction with the ennui that consumer culture promotes. The author of the story

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<sup>165</sup> Zhu, “I love American Currency “ (*Wo ai meiyuan*), p. 21

questioning his own value is the ultimate commentary on consumer ideology, transcending the characters and the paper on which they are constructed.

One problem or misunderstanding among analysts of Chinese art and literature is the belief that works created outside socialist media controls automatically equate to dissent. Some artists have commentary about society that is divorced from the concerns of politics. Some artists use propaganda imagery from previous eras because they want to invoke the feelings people have toward those periods in time, and others use comparable techniques because those are the techniques they are comfortable with and used to using. One young artist said:

[the point] is not to reject social concerns. Why can't I have my own opinions about society? The point is to reject the social convention that says we are all supposed to 'fit' our perceptions into works and forms that are considered standard-- by the Communist party, by the opponents of the Communist part, or by somebody else. Chinese culture demands that we fit, and we don't want to. But that doesn't mean we have no opinions about the world. Why should it? The questions are totally unrelated.<sup>166</sup>

To reject the idea that an artist is supposed to fit his perceptions into the forms of the ruling government is not only a rejection of artists' roles in Chinese socialist society but also Confucian notions of social responsibility. The result is a model of artistic expression much more recognizable to the West, i.e. that in which the artist or writer is primary, and the social effects of his work are secondary, if considered at all.

### **Comparing Propaganda Art and Literature and Their Effectiveness**

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<sup>166</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing*, p. 276

“The media’s power to expand our imaginary universe is as remarkable as its potential to direct or control the worlds to which we have access. We tend, on the whole, to absorb its messages, whether eagerly or absent-mindedly. In daily life our powers of vigilance against such unthreatening parts of our environment are inevitably limited, and the images that we absorb naturally become part of our reality.”<sup>167</sup>

-Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen

Art and literature in socialist China are more similar than they are different in content and form, limitations, and theoretical origins. They were both products of a socialist Chinese media system that existed roughly from the mid 1940s to the mid 1980s. This means that party controls relegated them to the role that Mao Zedong outlined for them at the *Yan'an Talks*. Stylistically, socialist realism dominated both media and severely limited innovation. Both art and literature were subject to censorship: both self-censorship and the censorship of a substantive system of literary and artistic control, the purpose of which was unequivocally for social engineering. Central authority had a monopoly on their production and distribution. The same cycle of relaxation and repression governed them; propaganda objectives often corresponded, and the scope of the restrictions was the same. The constant desire on the part of part of artists and writers to work past the style and content restrictions placed upon them is in part due to assumptions about the role of a scholar in imperial tradition. Not surprisingly, artists and writers produced the most interesting materials in both media during the times of relaxation. During one such period following the Cultural Revolution both media responded by producing scar literature and scar art. Both were limited in scope and failed to produce works that truly conveyed the horror of the movement.

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<sup>167</sup> Link, Perry, et. al. ed. *Popular China* “Chinese Women and Lifestyle Magazines” (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Maryland, 2001) p. 137-161



The two media differed in one significant way. One way to gauge the political atmosphere in China at any given time is by examining its media-- not just what is produced, but also what is *not* produced. The Cultural Revolution, for example, was something of a literary wasteland. Yet it was one of the most prolific periods for propaganda art. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, when a number of factors including political change and market reforms led to a renaissance of Chinese literature, propaganda art started its decline. What factors explain these divergences? We have already observed parallel themes in art and literature throughout the various social movements, almost exclusively by virtue of their support for political messages and movements. Why should the two diverge on these occasions, namely the Cultural Revolution and the Four Modernizations era? It would appear that despite many similarities, art and literature followed parallel courses yet served fundamentally different functions. The difference lies in intended audiences. Literature has an inherent limitation when it comes to its effectiveness: the literacy of its audience. Given this limitation, literature could, in general, only hope to target urban, educated consumers. Posters, however, were ubiquitous in public and private life, their purpose was immediate and direct, and their audience included the poorest peasant to the most educated urban elite (though whether or not they affected these classes differently is a subject for debate). Therefore, given this difference, it is natural that during the Cultural Revolution when urban intellectuals were the most oppressed class that the media targeting them would decline. The fact that the repressed social class also creates literature is also a factor. Similarly, during the Four Modernizations era, when the Party regarded its relationship with the intelligentsia to be of primary importance, and writers consequently were subjected to fewer restrictions, naturally literature developed more fully.

After an extensive overview of propaganda throughout Chinese socialist history, the question still remains: was it effective? The issue of audience reactions is an area that has not received sufficient attention,<sup>168</sup> so it is difficult to reach any solid conclusions. In addition, as audiences became more or less receptive to propaganda media throughout the various social movements, it is difficult to gauge how audience preferences might change. For example, an entire generation of Chinese observed disaccord between the propaganda messages of the Great Leap Forward and the reality of the situation, thereby rendering later representations less credible. Similarly, the Anti-Rightist movement was instrumental in creating a kind of paranoia among intellectuals, even during comparatively liberal times. Some concrete factors cast doubt on the potential effectiveness of propaganda. First, illiteracy among the vast majority of Chinese people preordains literature's latitude of influence to a small minority of educated, mostly urban consumers who constitute only about ten percent of the population.<sup>169</sup> As a result, only a few million copies of even the most popular literary works in the 1960s were created in a population of six to seven hundred million.<sup>170</sup> Despite its limitations, literature did have a large potential for effectiveness. The urban educated minority it could reach is small, but that minority is an influential one. This fact is evidenced by the primacy of intellectuals in Maoist policy. Nearly every major socialist movement has some element that specifically seeks to regain control over the influence of intellectuals; hence, social movements simultaneously

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<sup>168</sup> Stefan Landsberger shares in my lament the lack of research data on the subject, though he is particularly referencing the Four Modernizations era propaganda on page 207 of *From Revolution to Modernization*

<sup>169</sup> Link, Perry, ed. *Stubborn Weeds* p. 14

<sup>170</sup> McDougall, Bonnie S. *Talks at the Yan'an Conference* p. 40

shape and are shaped by the scope of intellectuals' influence, thereby creating the cycle of repression and relaxation that characterizes the history of socialist media.

Another way in which one could judge the effectiveness of propaganda media stems from the observation that propaganda reflects an attempt to affect change on social reality; however, social reality cannot possibly change at the rate social policy changed in socialist China.<sup>171</sup> This observation leads to the conclusion that social policy epitomized in propaganda media could not have reflected social reality at any given time. This fact is one of the factors responsible for the disconnect between idealized socialist life portrayed in propaganda media and the realities of socialist life. Given these conclusions, it is not surprising that after nearly 40 years of indoctrination, it took Chinese writers and artists only a few years to break out of the molds in which the communist party had forced them to form; it took Chinese people in general only a few years to develop a deeply cynical attitude toward propaganda media.

Inherent to the Chinese Communist Party's belief that propaganda could be effective is the assumption that strategic implementation of artistic talent coupled with strict party control over distribution and access to media could lead to new social consciousness. Yet in this assumption lies another intrinsic assumption: that the media is the active element, conveying the intended message in a uniform and predicable way, and the audience is the passive element, absorbing and obeying the message without interpretation. For some of the audience this assumption may be true, but for many it is false. Peasants, who were often touted as both the most loyal Communist supporters and used as justification for policy against intellectuals, were not, despite appearances, always supportive of the Party. Perry Link writes, "But it by no means

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<sup>171</sup> Link, Perry, et. al. ed. *Unofficial China* p. 11

follows, as the Communist party leadership sometimes claims, that the distance between peasants and intellectuals implies peasant support for the state. ...Chinese peasantry [live] in chronic resentment of the state, both for the taxes and regulations it imposes on their economic activity and for its denigration of their 'feudal social and spiritual life.'<sup>172</sup> In *Heroes and Villains in Communist China*, Joe C. Huang reports from a survey that the most popular early literature among peasants was that which depicted life and events as they experienced them—as realistically as possible. He writes, "They contend that only stories which truthfully reflect life are good."<sup>173</sup> In the progression of socialist history, especially during the Cultural Revolution, media generally tended to be a less and less accurate reflection of real life. It is reasonable to conclude that as reality and the prescriptive reality of propaganda diverged, this group favored the propaganda less and less. Viewers are analytical subjects. They know what is expected of them—to read the political slogans, agree with them, and carry them out. But just because they understand their role in the system does not mean they accept it. Reader/viewer response could mean maintaining the appearance of concession, while simultaneously accepting that the spirit of the message has become irrelevant to their daily lives. An historian commented on political slogans: "'People seldom read the slogans. The local officials who put them up don't expect others to read them. They just go through the motions, and then their job is done. That's what everyone expects.'<sup>174</sup> Presenting an appearance of conformity was more important (or perhaps more realistic) than following propaganda directives.

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<sup>172</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing*, p. 27-28

<sup>173</sup> Huang, Joe C. *Heroes and Villains*, p. 324-326

<sup>174</sup> Link, Perry *Evening Chats in Beijing*, p. 186

The exposure and ubiquity that propaganda enjoyed did not mean that it was always credible. For example, one campaign supported by propaganda posters was “third-world solidarity” against imperialism and the association with Sino-African relations, was not taken seriously among the Chinese people. A reporter said, “‘The ‘Chinese-African Friendship’ proclaimed by Zhongnanhai [that is, the top leadership] doesn’t mean a thing. No one even takes it seriously enough to have an opinion on it.’”<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, people came to understand that media that received official sanction was less likely to be interesting or innovative. One 1986 survey of film audiences found that people were less likely to see films that received official praise.<sup>176</sup> Similarly, a novelist who had been popular before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution found that his pre-Cultural Revolution works remained popular in the post-Mao years, while the works he wrote during the Cultural Revolution “which remained tainted by Cultural Revolution policies...” were not popular in the post-Mao years.<sup>177</sup> This fact is evidence that audiences were not only sensitive to the quality of art and literature, but that they increasingly used this quality as a deciding factor in forming their preferences.

Another way to gain insight into propaganda’s potential effectiveness is to look at personal accounts. Xiaomei Chen describes the varying effects propaganda posters had in different periods of her life. Early on, it appears that the effect posters had on her was precisely the same as ideologues would hope. She writes in “Growing Up with Posters in the Maoist Era,” “The posters of Lei Feng and various picture books depicting his magical transformation from suffering subaltern in the old society to

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 225

<sup>176</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 257

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 175n33

model soldier of socialist China had much to do with planting the seed of national pride in me and molding me into an aspiring young citizen of the young republic.”<sup>178</sup> Later, however, she becomes disillusioned with messages in propaganda and continues to admire them only as public artworks.<sup>179</sup>

Writer Duo Duo also describes the point in the early 1970s at which he could no longer respond positively to propaganda posters:

At the age of 20 I got to know Vincent Van Gogh and Picasso. Since then no one can force me to relate to a poster. When, under the permanently watchful eye of our leader, I cycled alone past walls covered with posters of big, strong workers, peasants and soldiers, I saw myself as [a] figure from a Kafka novel. That is when I began to write and to feel lonely. That was the beginning of my life in exile.<sup>180</sup>

Yet despite his reaction against political propaganda, his essay makes it clear that it was a large part of his formative consciousness; looking at them makes him feel nostalgic. It is clear that propagation and control over the media did produce an effect, but beyond these few testimonies to their deeply personal influence, it is also clear that propaganda simply changed the way people presented themselves, and not necessarily their internal attitudes. Perry Link writes, "Personal behavior is molded partly by social context in any society, but in Mao's China both the degree of required conformity and the punishments for aberration increased to a point where people had no choice but to work on new ways to present themselves."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Evans, Harriet, Stephanie Donald, ed. *Picturing Power*, p. 107

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 109

<sup>180</sup> Wolf, Michael *Chinese Propaganda Posters*, p. 11

<sup>181</sup> Link, Perry *Uses of Literature*, p. 305

## **Conclusion**

This survey of the artistic and literary spheres of socialist China shows the ways in which the CCP controlled the arts, adapting them to their propaganda purposes, how this control had a tendency to break down and then be reinforced, and questions the degree of the effectiveness of propaganda. Above all, I hope I have conveyed the cyclical nature of repression and relaxation exerted over the arts defined by the complex relationship between the Party and intellectuals. Sometimes relaxation was a failed experiment or perhaps even a trap, as during the Hundred Flowers campaign; sometimes it was a byproduct of the breakdown of the controlling bureaucratic bodies, such as the period between the Great Leap Forward and the beginning of crackdown around 1963; other times relaxation was a strategic attempt to exploit the talents of intellectuals, so important to the task of modernization. Repression was a reaction against a liberalizing trend. It was motivated by the fear party leaders had for intellectuals' influence—a fear that is justified by intellectuals' traditional Confucian moral authority.

The artists and writers of every era for the most part genuinely wanted to contribute to Chinese society, culture, and even the Communist Party. The restrictions placed on their art and, indeed, on their daily lives, often did not allow them to do so outside a very narrow scope that the Communist government defined. Artists and writers of the early revolutionary era wholeheartedly supported the Communist Party and made sacrifices to show it. After the betrayal of the Hundred Flowers Campaign by the Anti-Rightists movement, artists and writers learned caution but still for the most part felt that the problems with Socialism were within themselves and not indicative of a systemic flaw. Following the Great Leap Forward, artists and writers had a brief respite from concerted efforts to support the failing social movement;

however, this break was followed by rapid return to conservatism that culminated in the Cultural Revolution. The stringent limitations of style and narrow scope of permissible topics during the Cultural Revolution ruthlessly impoverished the development of Chinese art. Literary output was severely lessened because the extremes of the Cultural Revolution affected writers and literary consumers the most. Following Mao's death, the artists gradually shed their stylistic limitations and writers again found their voice. The creation of scar literature and scar art was a hopeful sign that spoke to artists' and writers' willingness and ability to be expressive outside the confines imposed on them from above. Ultimately, however, political controls reasserted themselves and freedom of expression was never achieved. It would take time, economic reform, value changes, and a growing intolerance for intrusive politics to develop arts independent of government controls-- a process that continues today. Much more could be said about this process if there were more research on consumer preferences and the possible role they had in determining the direction of art and literature. After all, the arts' reliance on popular support is already a theoretical truth if one were to accept that all the times Mao cited "mass support" to affect change in literary and intellectual policy, he genuinely was tapping into mass needs.

Artistic repression still exists in China today. The CCP's ability to censor information is rooted in its presupposed moral authority to do so; the government believes that economic growth vindicates its policies and ideologies. Indeed, given this mentality, the Communist government's legitimacy is based on maintaining economic prosperity and social stability, a fact supported by the types of information typically controlled: economic data, certain social welfare information like disease deaths and deaths as a result of accidents, and competing ideologies, like *falungong*. Times have changed; but the overall strategy of controlling media to maintain



legitimacy has not. The question is whether this strategy will work. Will the new market economy paired with modern modes of communication such as the internet impinge on the party's ability to maintain control over information or will it merely present a new opportunity? Times, after all, have changed.

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